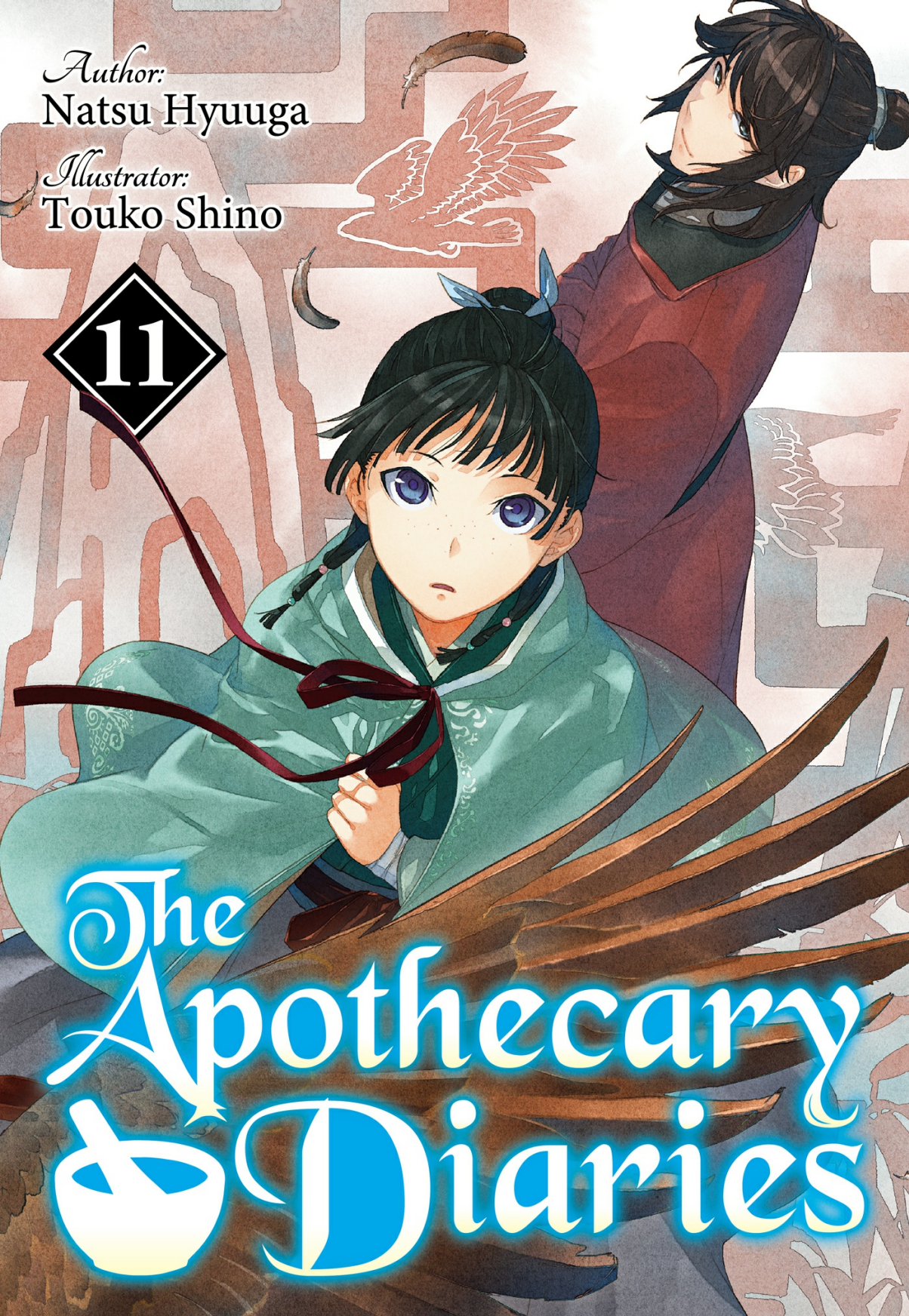
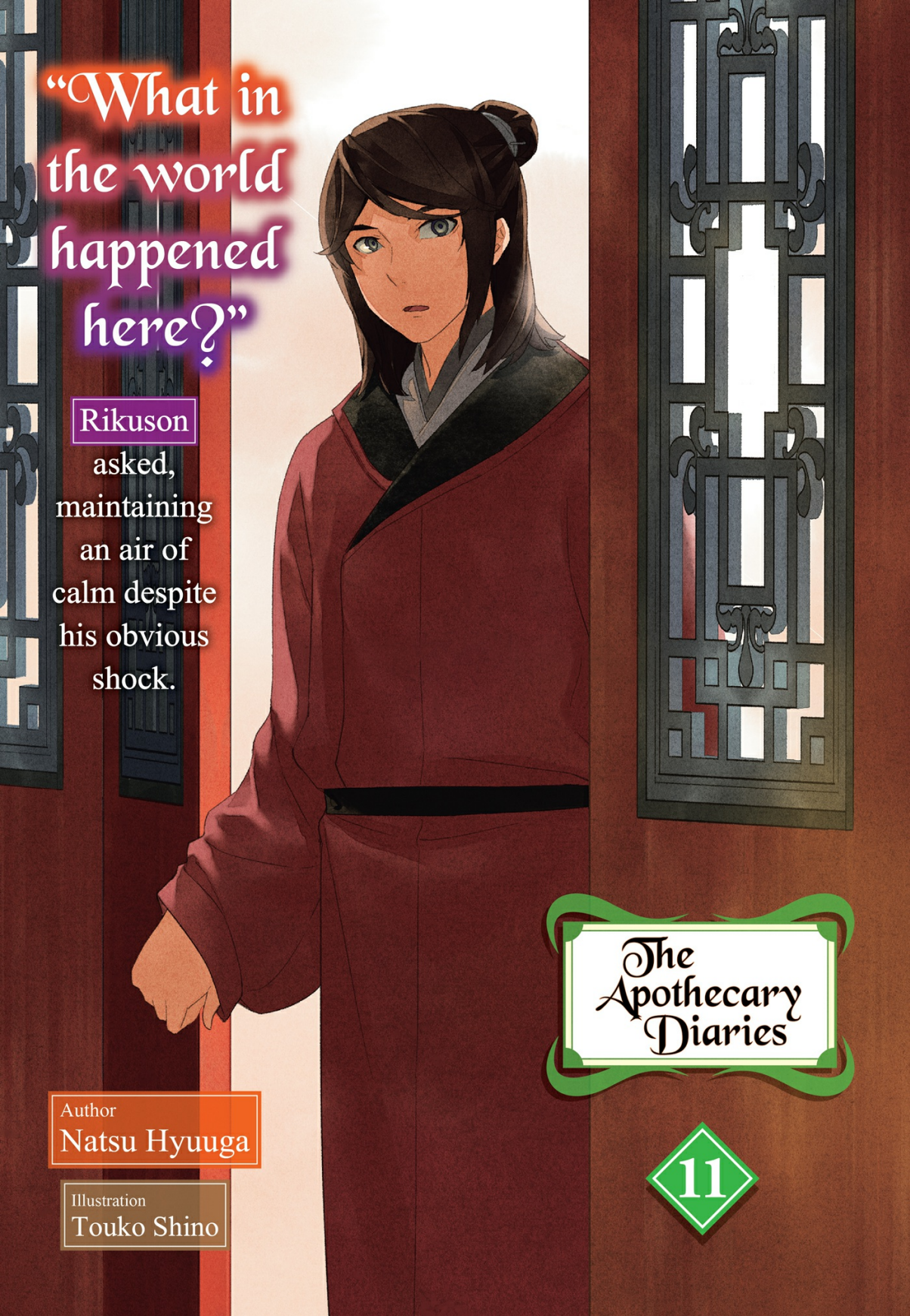

Author:
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrator:
Touko Shino
11
The Apothecary Diaries


"What in the world happened here?"
Rikuson asked, maintaining an air of calm despite his obvious shock.
The Apothecary Diaries
11
Author
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustration
Touko Shino

"Yao. En'en. Whatever seems to be the matter?"
"Master Lahan!"
Standing by the gate of the house were two of his honored younger sister's colleagues, a pair of young women.

In front of him was Gyoku-ou, interposing himself between Jinshi and the masses. The people were keeping a respectful distance, almost like spectators at a play.

Maomao watched
Onsou lead
the freak strategist
away.
"What is it? You can ask your daddy anything!"

"What are you doing?"
"I need a charge."
Jinshi's long fingers pressed into the back of Maomao's hand, while his palm pressed against hers.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Jinshi's Success, Jinshi's Guilt

Jinshi uses his position as Imperial younger brother to obtain support for I-sei Province from the central government. As supplies remain scarce, Maomao finds problems drifting down on her like burning cinders.

There's Gyoku-ou's granddaughter, suffering from a mysterious stomach ailment; the old man that the freak strategist, Lakan, drags into things, whom he calls the Sage; the eccentricities of her colleague, Tianyu.
And then there is he of whom there has been no news...
Is he finally coming home?!

Despite all his efforts, resentment toward the Imperial younger brother mounts in the western capital. As the people are tormented by starvation and sickness brought on by the insect swarm, they begin to point their rage toward Jinshi, and he finds himself the object of hatred by the very commoners he thought he was protecting.
How will he respond? Then there's the acting governor, Gyoku-ou himself—what is he really up to?
Will Maomao escape all this danger in one piece?

Character Profiles

Maomao
Formerly an apothecary in the pleasure district. Downright obsessed with medicines and poisons, but largely uninterested in other matters. Has deep respect for her adoptive father Luomen. Twenty years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. He's remarkably down to earth for someone so gorgeous, but there's no telling what he might do if he lets himself go. Has an inferiority complex about his no-more-than-average intellectual abilities. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-one years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical capacities than most. He's very serious, but that makes him easy to tweak. In love with Consort Lishu.

Gaoshun
Basen's father. A well-built soldier, he was formerly Jinshi's attendant, but now he serves the Emperor personally. He's accompanying Jinshi on his expedition by order of His Majesty.

Chue
Baryou's wife, and mother of his child. Not strikingly attractive, but she makes up for it with her initiative and silly personality.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's a high-ranking member of the military, but his bizarre behavior causes people to avoid him. He loves Go and Shogi and is a formidable player.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. Twenty-two years old.

Rikuson
Once Lakan's aide, he now serves in the western capital. He has a photographic memory for people's faces.

Gyokuen
Empress Gyokuyou's father. Officially the ruler of the western capital, but when his daughter ascended to the throne he moved to the royal capital.

Gyoku-ou
Gyokuen's eldest son; Empress Gyokuyou's half-brother. Currently leads the western capital while his father is away.

Suiren
Jinshi's lady-in-waiting and former wet nurse.

Taomei
Basen's mother and Gaoshun's wife. Blind in one eye. A "masterpiece of a woman" who reminds one of a predatory animal. Six years older than Gaoshun.

Baryou
Gaoshun's son and Basen's older brother. Spends most of his time hidden behind a curtain.

Tianyu
One of Maomao's colleagues; a young physician. He can seem frivolous, and he has a thing for En'en. He's quick to stick his nose in whenever something interests him.

Dr. You
An upper physician who hails from the western capital.

Lahan's Brother
Older brother of Lahan; Lakan's nephew and adopted son. A perfectly

ordinary person who shines when offering quips.

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Prologue

He liked the sound of the carriages: the neighing of the horses, the creaking of the wheels, the shouting of the drivers.

He liked the sound of the marketplace: the calls of merchants, the bustle of the crowds, the laughter of children.

Even here, in this parched and arid place where people had to fight the land itself, they lived bravely.

That was a wonderful thing, his mother had taught him. The boy was often with her, and had heard her say it many times.

His mother worked with birds; she surveyed the whole world from a desk. She would laugh and tell him that one day, he would be able to do this too. Sometimes she would look deep into his eyes and appear to be thinking about something. Or sometimes, it seemed to him, remembering someone.

“Just make sure to protect this city,” she had said. The boy nodded assiduously. “Help it grow big and strong.”

The boy told her that he understood.

“Grow up to be just like your father,” she told him, and he replied with laughter that of course he would.

If the boy grew big and strong, so would the town.

They would have such abundance that a bad harvest would mean nothing to them, such strength that they would fear no enemy attack...

He wanted to be like his mother with her kindness; carry himself with his father’s authority.

He wanted these things so that his home, the western capital, could be richer and more beautiful than anywhere else.

Chapter 1: Dried Fruit

Maomao was at one of the stoves, cooking. Afraid she might poison herself if she didn't get some air, she took a deep breath in, let it out again, then wrapped a hand towel around her nose and mouth.

It had been five days since the swarm, and they were finally almost rid of the grasshoppers around the medical office. There were a few survivors—at least until Maomao found them, whereupon she would crush them underfoot.

"Do we still need those poisonous plants?" Lihaku asked as he stirred a big pot.

"Yeah. There might be a second wave." Maomao chopped some of the herbs in question with a cleaver and dumped them in the pot. "You need to make sure you cover your mouth, Master Lihaku."

"Aw, it's just a little smoke, isn't it?" He frowned, not wanting to take the trouble.

"Do we remember what happened when we weren't careful around the burned-out storehouse? Do we remember singeing our head?"

"Urk..." Lihaku obediently covered his nose and mouth.

"Miss Maomao! Miss Maomaaaao!" Chue appeared, announced by her distinctive tip-tapping footsteps. She was carrying a large box. "I got the extra medicine and bandages you wanted!"

"Thank you," Maomao said, inspecting the contents of the box. "Is this all?"

"Afraid so," Chue said with an apologetic look. Despite the box's size, there wasn't actually much in it. Certainly not nearly as much as Maomao had asked for. "Supplies are short everywhere. I think we'll just have to make do."

"Yes, of course. You're right."

The grasshoppers might be gone, but that didn't mean they could relax. People were on edge, and that sort of anxiety could lead to outbreaks of violence. Some people were hurt, and many more were in poor health. Medicine always seemed to be in short supply already—with a contagion about, of course they wouldn't have enough.

Maomao passed Chue a mortar and pestle, encouraging her to work

too. Chue obligingly but resignedly rolled up her sleeves.

I don't think we'll run out of actual food. But there are other problems.

The bugs hadn't gotten to all of the provisions in the grain silos, but there was a dearth of fruit and vegetables, meaning everyone would have an imbalanced diet for the foreseeable future.

The real trouble is a few months from now. Supplies would need to be closely regulated until the next harvest.

People could be complex and difficult. Just telling them that everything would be fine and to relax wouldn't do the trick. As soon as they realized there wouldn't be enough to go around, they would start hoarding. Soon there would be shortages, and then people would start to starve.

Maomao said, "I'm sure our dear acting governor is well aware of all that..."

"When you get right down to it, Master Gyoku-ou is a doer," Chue replied pointedly.

"A doer?"

For a variety of reasons, Maomao was not personally a big fan of Gyoku-ou's, but a mark of adulthood was the ability to separate personal animus from objective evaluation.

"He sent provisions and distributed food around the western capital and the surrounding towns, wherever there wasn't enough to eat. Being quick to act, that's worth a lot."

A swift initial response would do much to reassure the populace.

"Started sharing right away, huh? Generous! I thought the powerful were supposed to try to keep everything for themselves," Lihaku said, impressed.

"Right? But he sent carriages full of provisions, all carefully calculated based on the population and the extent of the damage to each area." Chue never missed a thing, did she? She seemed to have checked all this out herself.

Wait. Is that... Was it all the stuff Rikuson had been preparing for so long? He'd made plenty of reports to Gyoku-ou. If the ruler had leveraged those, it would all make sense. *If that's true...* It would show that Gyoku-ou wasn't caught up in his pride, was willing to use anything and anyone he could, even those who had come from the central region. Maybe the reason he ordered Rikuson to stay behind in the village rather than coming straight home was precisely so as to get a better picture of what was happening on the ground.

Maomao couldn't offer Gyoku-ou her unqualified approbation, not when she knew how he had used Jinshi as a convenient foil, hardly treating him like a real Imperial relative. Still, she had to admit that as one of those politicians who felt his first duty was to his homeland, Gyoku-ou was proving quite effective.

I know someone who could stand to learn a thing or two from him. She wondered how Jinshi felt about the way Gyoku-ou was treating him. *The audacity of it doesn't seem to bother him.*

He did, however, chafe at his inability to act openly. He wanted to help, but his hands were tied by his status as a guest and visitor. Still, he did what he could, like sending Lihaku with Maomao to the farming village, or getting the freak strategist to form a bug-extermination team. Jinshi was like a duck—paddling like hell underneath.

Jinshi never seemed unduly attached to his power. Yes, he sometimes acted like a man of authority, but when had he really pressed his status as Imperial younger brother?

During the Shi clan rebellion, maybe, but that's about the only time I can think of.

On that occasion, Jinshi had wielded his status openly. Maomao was in no position to criticize him—she had been one reason he had done what he did—but in any case, that was the moment His Majesty's younger brother had been most visible to the public, quashing a rebellion.

Maomao knew that after that, Jinshi had begun to fulfill the duties of his station in life. He'd been as busy as he'd been during his time as a "eunuch"—maybe even busier—but much of his work was things that had been foisted upon him. As far as projects he chose to pursue of his own volition...

The preparations to counter the swarm are about the only thing I can think of.

People said he was worrying too much; they said he was raising taxes unreasonably; ordinary people and bureaucrats alike had regarded him with disdain, but still he had done it.

He should have made himself more visible. Like he was when he was a eunuch. Since returning to his position as Imperial younger brother, Jinshi had hardly used his most potent weapon: his looks.

Maybe he's holding back so he doesn't get flooded with suitors. Without the buffer of being a "eunuch," and now with the added inducement of the power of being the Emperor's younger brother, there

would be no shortage of women who wished to become his queen.

Suitors, huh...

Maomao recalled Rikuson's little joke. She could only assume Chue had reported it to Jinshi along with everything else. What a lot of trouble.

"Miss Chue, did you report everything?" Maomao asked. She deliberately chose not to say what she was thinking of—how Rikuson had asked, back in the village, if he might seek her hand in marriage.

"I'm not sure what report you mean, but don't worry. It's all kept top secret from our honored strategist," Chue said.

Maomao paused. So she had told Jinshi. Lihaku gave them a look—he didn't know what they were talking about—but he kept stirring the pot.

"If it was just a joke, then no harm done, right?" Chue said.

"Right. And it *was* just a joke."

"Right. But some people might take it seriously."

That was premeditated! Chue knew exactly what she was talking about. Maomao pictured Jinshi at his most troublesome. Boy, was she going to get an earful about this the next time they saw each other. Then again, maybe it would be all right...

"All done, young lady!" said the quack doctor, showing her a big, flat dish filled with rows of pills. Each of the pills was about as large as a grain of rice and very consistent in size, showing that he had used a mold to make them. Maomao remembered when she had first met the quack—she'd been shocked to discover he was producing the balls of medicine by hand, causing each one to be a slightly different size.

"Thank you very much. If you could deal with these next, please."

"Sure! Don't mind if I do." The quack was in fine spirits, although it was hard to tell which of them was the physician and which the assistant.

Not to mention, somewhere along the line, Tianyu had disappeared. When Maomao went to find him to try to get him to help, she discovered him dissecting some former livestock at the cafeteria. In I-sei Province, adults were expected to be able to butcher animals, so a doctor who knew how to do the same didn't raise any eyebrows. Maomao even started to think that maybe Tianyu had become a doctor precisely because he liked dissecting things.

"This is practice. Wouldn't want to lose my edge," he said, dangling one of the animal's legs teasingly at Maomao. Being a prick, as usual.

Dr. You and the others were busy treating the injured and sick in town. Everyone who had been posted at the main house and the administrative

office had their hands full trying to deal with the aftermath of the plague. The freak strategist in particular was always short-staffed, so he appropriated a few people from the annex as reinforcements, leaving the place quieter than usual.

Maomao took stock of the annex as she walked back to the medical office. A minimal handful of people had been left behind to guard Jinshi. The presence of lively souls like the quack and Chue made the place seem boisterous, but they were two of only a few voices to be heard around the annex. The bustling of the marketplace was absent, and there was no laughter of children playing. Occasionally, raised voices might be heard in a minor argument, but that was about all.

Wish I could go out there and get a look at the city, Maomao thought. Unfortunately, this wasn't the time for a constitutional. Even if the weather was very nice.

The quack doctor, too, gazed out the window as he *squeeeeeezed* the mold down. He was checking the position of the sun. "I think it's about snack time," he mumbled longingly. Normally, snack time would see him off to the kitchen, somehow finagling himself some food.

"Hmm... I'm not sure snack time is on the cards today either," Chue said with a sniff. "They're filling up the storehouses and worried about staple foods. I think our little pleasures will have to wait."

"Sure, sure..." said the quack, who had been enduring life without snacks for several days now.

If missing snack time is the worst of his troubles, he's pretty lucky, Maomao thought as she started mixing up some medicine.

She was so focused on her concoction that she almost didn't notice evening falling. She was just cleaning up tools when someone knocked loudly on the office door.

"Who's there?" Lihaku demanded. He opened the door to find a young woman, white as a sheet. One of the ladies-in-waiting, maybe.

"Wh-Where's the doctor?" she asked.

"The doctor? You mean me?" The quack trotted up with a blank expression. The woman had obviously come running as hard as she could, and he offered her a cup of water. "C-Come with me!" she cried. "Please! The young... The young mistress!"

Young mistress? Maomao wondered. She hadn't heard about any mistress. Then again, this was Gyokuen's home, so she was sure whoever

this person was, they must be a relative of his. Even with only a few guards left, no one of suspicious background would be admitted to the annex.

It was obvious from the woman's behavior that this was an emergency, but Maomao didn't think dragging the quack doctor to the scene was going to get the poor maid very far. Knowing she couldn't allow one of Gyokuen's own relatives to go unattended, Maomao raised her hand. "If you'll pardon me. The Master Physician is here exclusively to tend to the Moon Prince. We can't let you just cart him off somewhere. Aren't there any other doctors in this house?"

It was the most roundabout way of refusing that she could think of.

"They're all out! Please! If someone doesn't help her, the young mistress... She'll...!"

Figured.

A special exception had been made for this annex because a member of the Imperial family was in residence—but the other doctors, including Dr. You, were all pressed into service to treat the commoners in town. If even they had to go serve in the city, how much busier must the local physicians be?

"Could you at least tell us what's going on with your mistress?" Maomao asked, making the woman drink the water the quack had brought her. She slugged it down in a single gulp, then slowly let out a breath. "For starters, who is your mistress?" Maomao hated how long this was going to take, but she had to start at the beginning.

After a moment, the woman said, "She's Master Gyokuen's granddaughter."

"How old is she?"

"Eight."

"And her symptoms?"

"Well, she never did eat very much, but ever since the swarm of grasshoppers, she's nearly stopped taking any food at all. The only thing she's been willing to eat for days is fruit, but then today she complained her stomach hurt and vomited several times."

Stomach pains and vomiting? Those symptoms could be almost anything.

"What kind of fruit did she eat today?" Maomao asked. Conceivably, the girl could have gotten food poisoning from consuming bad fruit, but even in an emergency like this, Maomao had trouble picturing a "young

mistress” eating something rotten.

“Her mother gave her dried fruit.”

“Raisins, perchance?”

The woman shook her head. “No. Something that had been brought from the capital—I didn’t recognize it.”

“From the capital...” Maomao cocked her head. I-sei Province produced more dried fruit than the capital did. What was there in Kaou Province that they didn’t have here?

“It had reddish-brown skin and looked like it had been dusted in white powder,” the woman said.

Maomao’s eyes went wide. The lady-in-waiting seemed to be describing a dried persimmon. “All right. We’ll see your mistress right away. Where is she?” Maomao scrambled to get tools and medicines from the office shelves, then shoved them into a bag.

“Y-Young lady! You can’t just go running off on your own!” the quack cried.

“If we leave her, in the worst-case scenario, she might die!”

“D-D-Die?!” The quack trembled visibly. Lihaku picked up Maomao’s bag, while Chue seemed to have vanished in the meantime. “But... But I can’t leave the office...”

“I’ll go.” Maomao couldn’t exactly be *sure*-sure, but she was *almost* sure that the quack wouldn’t be able to treat the girl. She figured she would have to deal with this herself—but then someone else spoke up.

“Not by yourself you won’t, Niangniang. You’re not even a doctor.”

Who should it be but the man with the indolent grin? Tianyu was leaning against one of the posts in the medical office, a bag full of supplies already in his hand.

“I’ll go with you. At least I have the title of physician.”

He seemed to have gotten very interested in this case, but his presence made Maomao more anxious, not less.

“You’re coming with me?”

“No, Niangniang. *You’re* coming with *me*.”

Maomao stood in silence for a moment. He was right that according to the hierarchy, she was just there to help. And she had to admit that Tianyu was better than the quack when it came to actual doctoring.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!” Chue had reappeared in the meantime. “I reported to the Moon Prince.”

She worked quickly, all right.

“And what did he say?” Maomao asked. Even if she and Tianyu were willing to go see the patient, they wouldn’t be going anywhere without Jinshi’s permission. The lady-in-waiting, too, watched Chue intently.

“He says you can go ahead and go! Just make sure that you discuss the treatment very, verrry thoroughly with the patient!”

Lihaku looked like he was getting ready to accompany them; he was ordering another soldier to look after the quack.

Maomao turned to the worried servant and said, “Show us where we need to go.”

The lady-in-waiting guided them to a house near the annex. When they were ushered into the patient’s room, they found a woman in her mid-twenties by the bed—Maomao took her to be the child’s mother. She quaked violently. The sharply delineated features of her face were the picture of a classic western beauty.

A young girl lay on the bed, her face bloodless. She resembled her mother, but something, maybe the way she was lying there, made her look thin and weak.

Maomao and Tianyu asked Lihaku to wait at the door, then they went into the room. Chue had wanted to come with them, but this time she’d had to stay home.

“M-My daughter! Please, help my daughter!” The mother looked like she hadn’t even had time to brush her hair; it was stuck to her cheeks in messy strands.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tianyu said. He moved to pull the covers back from the patient, but the woman exclaimed, “What are you doing?!”

“I can’t very well examine the patient if I can’t see her,” he said. He was right, as far as it went—but these highborn houses were much concerned about chastity. They resisted the idea of a man looking at a woman’s body, even if the woman was a child of eight.

It was clear from the expression on Tianyu’s face that he had no *interest* whatsoever in a kid like this, but it was lost on her mother. Some people seemed to think doctors were all-powerful—that they could divine the patient’s condition, whatever it was, just by taking a pulse.

Maomao glanced at Tianyu.

“All right,” he said. “Would there be any issue if my assistant touches the patient?”

“N-No, I suppose that would be all right...”

Maomao bowed, then rolled back the covers. She took a spoon from her bag of tools and checked the inside of the girl's mouth. She opened the patient's eyelids and looked at her eyes.

"I'd like to open the patient's robe. Would that be all right?" Maomao asked. She was speaking to the mother, but she glared at Tianyu, who held up his hands and turned around.

Maomao undid the robe and felt the patient's abdomen. It was noticeably swollen. She slid her fingers across the skin, and when she found something that felt hard and round, she pressed gently. The girl groaned.

"Wh-What was that?" the mother said.

"Gas is trapped in the stomach. There's a foreign object in her intestines that's preventing it from escaping." *Just like I thought.* Maomao had guessed the moment the lady-in-waiting said the girl had eaten dried persimmons.

"A foreign object?" The mother's eyes went wide. She seemed to be searching her memory for anything unusual that her daughter might have swallowed.

"I was told she's eaten nothing but fruit for the last several days," Maomao said. "And today she had dried fruit—dried persimmons, yes?"

"That's right. Even when she didn't seem to have an appetite, she would eat sweet things. Because of those awful grasshoppers, we haven't been able to get honey or fresh fruit, so I gave her some dried persimmons that we got as a gift. You don't think they were poisoned, do you?!"

"No, it's not poison," Maomao said, gently rebuffing the mother as she tried to squeeze closer to her daughter. "Eating too many persimmons can cause stones in the stomach. How many persimmons did she eat?"

After a moment, the woman replied, "Three."

"Three?" Pretty good job for a little kid. But not enough to cause a gastrolith, Maomao suspected. *Is it possible? Could three persimmons do that? Maybe they got caught in the fibers from the other fruit?*

She thought it through, trying to figure out if there was anything she was missing. A bead of sweat began to roll down the patient's forehead, and Maomao absently wiped it away with a cloth.

Huh?!

Then she realized why the patient looked so haggard. Unlike her mother's bountiful head of hair, the child's hair was thin and scraggly, and it was turning white at the roots.

White hair?

It was said that a terrifying experience could turn the hair white—and there was no question that witnessing a huge swarm of grasshoppers would be a major shock for an eight-year-old child.

Well, now was the time for action, not thinking. But how to explain to the mother? They couldn't just charge ahead.

"When there's a foreign object in the stomach, there are three main modes of treatment," Maomao began.

"Y-Yes?"

Maomao looked at Tianyu. He was still turned around, but even with his back to her she could see him nod. He was going to let her handle this part.

"First, you can give the patient water to help move the object through the insides and eventually evacuate it."

The mother nodded.

"The second way, by contrast, is to administer liquid medication from below to encourage evacuation."

From below—in other words, through the anus.

"Water! Bring water!" the panicked mother commanded a servant before even hearing what the third option was.

"I'm afraid in the case of your daughter, I can't recommend it. It seems likely that she would simply vomit up any water she drank."

"So you're going with the second possibility?" the mother asked. She didn't seem to like the idea of inserting medicine through the behind—but if that would have worked, they could have counted themselves lucky.

"No. Based on what I felt during my examination, I don't think encouraging evacuation will flush out the object."

"You can't do the second thing either? What's the third thing, then?" The woman fixed her with a look which, while not as potent as Taomei's, was formidable nonetheless.

"We cut open her stomach and remove the obstruction by hand."

Instantly the woman's face hardened and she pounded a nearby table. "You think this is funny?! You want to cut open my daughter's stomach?! You won't lay a finger on her!"

The mother, naturally, refused the suggestion. She gave Maomao her most frightening look, eyes flashing.

About what I expected.

"You're ordering us to attempt the first and second methods repeatedly

in order to remove the obstruction?" Maomao said.

"I am, and you'd better do it quickly!"

"I'm afraid I can't do what you're asking in good conscience. The patient would most likely only die. If you absolutely must use those methods, you'll have to do it yourself."

Maomao kept her voice calm and level. She felt for the young girl lying agonized on the bed, but she couldn't just administer a random treatment. If the girl died, there would be serious repercussions. If she ignored the mother and simply bulled ahead with a shocking treatment, however, she would get them thrown out.

There was only one choice: she had to persuade the mother.

"I have to warn you, I don't think there's time to consult with another doctor. If possible, I want to do the surgery right here, right now." She looked at the mother, whose eyes darted to Tianyu.

"You're a real doctor, aren't you? What this...assistant of yours is saying can't be right, can it?"

"I concur with her opinion," Tianyu replied in his most serious tone. "A simple gastrolith could be treated with one of the two methods she described. However, the swelling of the stomach in this case indicates an intestinal blockage. Your daughter needs immediate attention."

He sounded far more official than he usually did, but Maomao found herself on edge just the same. She was worried that he might slip back into his typical offhanded tone at any moment.

"If you cut into her belly... Won't that mean she can no longer bear children?" the mother asked.

"We won't touch the womb. The blockage is located far away from the reproductive organs," Maomao said, communicating the results of her exam. She was lucky that the physical examination had revealed the location of the problem. If they kept their heads and worked calmly, this would be a relatively easy surgery.

At least, it would be for someone like Dr. Liu.

This wasn't like attempting to remove lesions, or even extracting a shattered bone. Maomao tried to look steady, to reassure the mother.

"How much harm *will* you have to do? Whatever this thing is, it's not small, is it?" the mother asked, looking at Maomao with anxiety all over her face.

"I'll make a nine-centimeter incision in the skin. Then I'll cut into the stomach, remove the blockage, and then sew everything up with thread.

There will be a scar, but it should fade as she grows."

Maomao couldn't guarantee that the scar would disappear—a dire thought for the daughter of a noble family like this one.

"Nine centimeters..." The mother hesitated. But Maomao knew her daughter's life had to be more important to her.

"That's how long it will be if *I* do it."

"What does that mean?"

Maomao looked at Tianyu. "If you allow the physician here to do the operation, I expect it would be less than half that length."

Much as it kills me to say it.

Tianyu was, in fact, a gifted surgeon, as Maomao knew from seeing him dissect animals and work with cadavers. She might spend years practicing before she got as good as he was.

Just don't let it go to your head, you little...

Dr. Liu had warned them repeatedly during the dissections: when they did a real surgery, it wasn't going to be on a corpse. They were going to have a living, breathing human in front of them. There would be no room for error, he warned them, and they must always seek better surgical techniques. They could not allow themselves to kill a patient because they were caught up in their pride. Instead, they must throw away self-importance and rely on anyone and everyone they could.

So it was that Maomao said to the woman, "A physician bears that title for a reason. If you want the best chance of saving your daughter, then don't ask a simple assistant like me to do this. You'd be better off trusting the doctor."

The mother was silent for a long moment, hesitating. She looked at her suffering daughter, then narrowed her eyes and clenched her fist. "Go ahead."

Maomao let out a sigh of relief. "We'll need hot water and clean bandages. And could you start a fire for us?"

"Yes."

"If possible, we also need some ice, but if that's not available, whatever will most effectively cool the body."

The mother called a servant and ordered them to prepare everything Maomao and Tianyu would need for the surgery. While they waited, the two opened their bags of tools and took out surgical garments and white aprons, which they put on.

As they got ready, Maomao told Tianyu what she had observed during

her examination of the patient, as well as what she suspected the blockage was.

"Seriously? You think it's...?"

"I can only speculate, but yes."

She might lag behind him in dissection, but in terms of experience examining patients and assessing symptoms, Maomao was confident that she was ahead. She allowed herself a brief feeling of superiority at Tianyu's surprise.

"Niangniang, I'm going to do the actual surgery, but maybe you could..."

"I'll handle the anesthetic. Each of us can do what we're best at. You have a surgical knife with you?"

"But of course." Tianyu produced a finely honed knife. Maomao pulled out the medicines she'd brought along.

A child, eight years old, thin.

Yes, they were going to be cutting open her belly, but of course they wanted to minimize the pain as much as possible. Maomao had several analgesics with her. Poppy, thornapple, and henbane were the most well-known of such herbs, but many pain-killing medicines were also poisons. A misjudged dose could have serious consequences.

It was thornapple that Maomao had with her; she was more used to using it than either of the others. *It's often dissolved in wine to administer it, but I'd rather not.* Luomen, Maomao's mentor in all things medical, hadn't approved of giving medications with wine. True, it would contribute to blunting the pain, but it could also cause changes in the body. It could encourage blood flow and make bleeding harder to stop. It was better avoided, especially with a child who would not be used to it.

Maomao had, in the past, treated a burn without suitable tools or even decent anesthetic, but that had been a special case in which she suspected pain also brought the patient a certain kind of pleasure. She would never normally do that. No, she would never do it again.

She weighed some medicine with a scale. *The patient weighs... Let's call it half what an adult does.* She didn't want to give the girl too much and cause side effects. She would have to work very carefully.

Maomao gently sat the patient up.

"It hurts..."

The girl had been so quiet that Maomao had thought she was asleep, but now she spoke. Maomao smiled a little, then tilted the patient's chin

up. “Take this. It will help.”

She wetted the girl’s lips with the painkiller and helped her drink it. It would take thirty minutes or so for the medicine to take effect. During that time, they could prepare.

“I brought ice,” said the servant, who arrived with ice wrapped in straw. Maomao took it and broke off some chunks, which she put in a leather bag and pressed against the patient’s stomach.

They say you should never chill the abdomen, but there are exceptions to every rule.

Maomao wanted to minimize the amount of painkillers she gave the girl, so instead she numbed the area by making it cold, just as she’d done with Jinshi.

Tianyu polished his little knife, then heated it in the fire. He also had scissors out, as well as something to hold open the incision.

“What do we do about thread?” Maomao asked.

“For the outside, silk. Everything inside, gut,” he replied.

Gut: very literally, thread made from animal intestines. Maomao carefully took out a cloth packet of thread and began inspecting each strand. Ideally, the size should be as consistent as possible, and they wanted to avoid any frayed strands. It was a fraught moment, assessing the implements; they were, after all, about to operate on a young girl.

Finally, Maomao had to make a request of the child’s mother. A cruel request.

“Sometimes the two of us won’t have enough hands during the operation. Could some of your servants help us? Someone who isn’t going to be too disturbed by the sight of blood?”

“What...needs to be done?” the girl’s mother asked.

“We’ve given her anesthetics, but it may not numb all the pain. I tried to go easy on the drugs so there wouldn’t be too many side effects. However, this means that someone may have to hold your daughter down while we work in case she starts thrashing from the pain.”

“Is there any chance I could do it?”

“Do you think you can retain your composure when you see your child in that much pain? Once we start the surgery, we won’t be able to stop.” Maomao gave the woman her most intense look. No matter how much the mother cared about her daughter, if she was going to get in the way, then Maomao needed her out of here.

The mother, however, surprised Maomao with her acquiescence. “All

right," she said. "Will two be enough?"

I thought for sure she would give me a hard time about it. The mother's face was pale; she must have been near her limit. A servant offered her water.

The mother summoned two more servants, and Maomao instructed them to wash their hands, then dabbed their hands with alcohol. Both of the newcomers were doughty middle-aged women who didn't look like they would cower at a little blood.

"All right. What say we get started?" said Tianyu, who had wrapped a cloth around his mouth and another around his head. They transferred the patient to an improvised surgical table that the servants had created by putting some long tables together. The patient was breathing much easier; perhaps the painkillers were taking effect. Maomao placed a rag in the girl's mouth so she wouldn't bite her tongue.

Then they had the servants hold the girl's arms and legs. Maomao arranged an apron to cover everything but the operating site.

It was full dark outside, and they had several lights brought so that they could see where they were supposed to cut. To Maomao, it almost looked like the flames danced in answer to the patient's breathing. In, out.

It was true: working on the living was different from working on the dead. However much they had chilled the skin, there would be blood. The blade of Tianyu's knife was as fine as a razor.

Tools are an important part of doctoring, Maomao thought. Dr. Liu could exhort them as much as he liked to keep their ego out of it; it still annoyed Maomao that she wasn't as skilled as Tianyu. If she could get her hands on some tools that might help close the gap, then she wanted to.

The patient was looking pretty out of it from the drugs, her perceptions successfully numbed. That came as a relief to Maomao, who wiped at the blood that poured forth as Tianyu worked.

"Here it is," Tianyu said, his fingers brushing the swollen small intestine. He gently made an incision with his knife, then plunged a pair of forceps into the opening. Even the servants, who had watched them cut the girl's stomach open without flinching, recoiled.

"Is there something in there?"

"You called it, Niangniang."

With the forceps, Tianyu extracted a ball of undigested fruit fibers and a substantial quantity of hair that trailed from the intestine. Out and out it came as he pulled, dangling grotesquely.

Maomao offered Tianyu a tray, and he dropped the hair-and-fiber lump into it. There was still hair in the intestines, so Tianyu went back in with the forceps. Maomao had her mouth and nose covered, but even so the smell was nauseating, an acrid mix of blood and alcohol and stomach juices. The servants turned away as best they could, but they kept hold of the girl's arms and legs, faithful to the end.

"I didn't think a gastrolith formed exclusively of persimmon pits would be enough to cause an intestinal blockage," Maomao said. The patient's lack of appetite could probably be explained by her habit of eating her own hair. It wasn't entirely uncommon—some people ate things that weren't food as a response to stress. In this case, the girl had eaten more of her hair than usual because of the stress of the grasshopper plague, and exacerbated it with fibrous fruits and then persimmons. All of them together had formed the blockage.

Tianyu decided he had extracted all the hair he could and set the forceps aside. There were probably still strands in there, but they weren't going to be able to get all of them. The rest could be addressed by drinking copious water and maybe taking some laxatives to help work them through.

Maomao passed Tianyu the needle and thread. She used a hook to hold the incision open, making it easier to see the intestines, and wiped up the blood as it continued to flow. Each time Tianyu finished with a stitch, he swapped for the scissors and cut the thread. He stayed stooped over the patient as sweat poured down his brow.

When she was sure they had tied the last knot, Maomao felt a wave of exhaustion. She wished they could just put the patient back in bed, but this wasn't over yet. She wiped down the surgical site, taking care not to press too hard. Tianyu had been the star of the surgery itself, but it would fall on Maomao to care for the patient now that the procedure was over.

She'll need more painkillers for sure, and I should prepare some fever medication. Something to stop infection too; that will be crucial. And I have to explain to them what she should eat and how to care for her now that the operation is over.

In other words, there was much to do. At the same time, Maomao wanted to ask the patient's mother a few questions.

The servants who had been holding the girl down looked almost as spent as the doctors felt. The child had never fought, thankfully, but they were exhausted nonetheless.

“Say, Niangniang,” said Tianyu, who had already scrambled out of his blood-soaked surgical garment. He took the forceps and picked up the object they had extracted. “Do gastric juices make hair change color?” The hairball was discolored in places, brownish.

“Somewhat, maybe. Citrus juice can do it, after all.”

Maomao looked again at the patient’s hair. It was thin because she’d been pulling it out and eating it. The roots were white.

Maomao took the tray with the blockage on it and opened the door.

“Y-You’re finished?!” the girl’s mother asked. She was there, her face devoid of color. She must have been waiting at the door the entire time. Lihaku was simply sitting in a chair; he was used to waiting around.

“Yes, the surgery was a success,” Maomao said. “Would you come inside so we can give you some instructions?”

“Yes, of course.” The mother and a servant entered. The servant was the one who had summoned Maomao and Tianyu. As she and her mistress entered, the other two servants, the ones who had held the girl down, left the room.

“Who do you want to handle the instructions?” Maomao asked Tianyu.

“Hmm... Sounds annoying. You do it. Each of us does what we’re best at, right? Anyway, I get the feeling you’ve noticed something that was lost on me.”

As skilled a surgeon as he was, Tianyu was still Tianyu.

Once the mother and her servant were inside, Maomao made sure the door was closed, then showed them the tray. “This is what was stuck in your daughter’s intestines.”

The other two women cringed when they saw the undigested lump of fruit and hair.

“Why didn’t you tell us that your daughter has a habit of eating her own hair?”

The mother couldn’t quite meet Maomao’s eyes.

Maomao supplied her own answer. “No highborn person could bear the idea of anyone knowing their daughter did something so uncouth, could they? Fine.” She had half a mind to needle them about it a little more, but she would have to leave it at that. The issue was, they couldn’t afford to have something like this happen again. “Abnormal behaviors like eating one’s own hair are frequently caused by stress. Has anything happened to your daughter that might account for that?”

“No,” the woman said slowly. “No, I’ve only brought her up in the way

that any...any mother would."

Liar. Maomao picked up the lump with the forceps. The light and dark hairs formed a mottled pattern. "Your daughter's hair is naturally auburn, isn't it? You've been dying it black—that's the source of the stress. Or am I wrong?"

The mother flinched; she pursed her lips and one eye began to twitch. Her lady-in-waiting looked at the ground.

"If we don't resolve the cause, this will only happen again. How many times do you want your daughter's stomach to be cut open?"

"It's not like I enjoy doing it," the mother said softly. "But the girl has light-brown hair, and her father and I... We both have black hair..."

"Even two parents with black hair can produce a child with brown hair. It must happen fairly often here in I-sei Province. There's enough foreign blood going around."

After a long moment the woman said, "My father won't see it that way."

Her father? That would be Gyoku-ou. What did he have to do with this?

"My father hates all foreign blood. I-sei Province is part of Li, so he believes it should be ruled by a black-haired Linese. I always thought the same thing."

Until his own daughter gave birth to a grandchild with light hair.

"My father was distraught by his granddaughter. I had heard, though, that an infant's hair color can grow darker with age, so I told him she would have black hair eventually. But she never did."

So the white roots weren't from hair that had gone white with fear, but because the mother hadn't had time to redye her daughter's hair during the swarm. Considering the servant wasn't saying a thing, Maomao suspected she might be helping to dye the patient's hair.

Hates foreigners, huh? That was a tough philosophy to get away with when you lived in a nexus of trade. Then again, sometimes familiarity was precisely what bred contempt.

Maomao thought of her red-haired Empress. Gyokuyou and her half-brother might both be Gyokuen's children, but the family wasn't monolithic, as this story showed.

"If she won't stop eating her hair, then I suggest shaving her head until she calms down," said Maomao. It seemed like the quickest way.

"Shave her head?! What is she, a nun?"

“If you let it keep growing, she’ll just have baldish patches, and will that look better? Besides, if she continues to damage the roots, eventually the hair will stop growing at all.” As she talked, Maomao began taking medicines out of her bag. Anti-infective agents, antipyretics, painkillers. “At the moment, seeing her safely through the hours and days after her surgery is more important. I’m going to give you detailed instructions. If you feel you don’t understand them, I can write down the important points. She needs someone to keep an eye on her postsurgical progress. It doesn’t have to be me and this physician if you don’t like us, but make sure you get *some* doctor to look at her. I do have to warn you that even if the surgery was a success, she could take a turn for the worse if she doesn’t get proper treatment after.”

If the wound opened or got infected, for example, there would be trouble.

“For now she’s still numb, so she’s calm, but as the painkillers wear off, it’s going to start hurting. Don’t let her touch the surgical site. The pain may keep her awake and she may run a fever. I have medicines here for both those possibilities that you can use as necessary.”

There was a moment as the woman absorbed all this, then she said, “I understand.” Her lip quivered as she approached the bed where her daughter slept. She brushed her thin hair, the faintest hint of relief on her face.

Finally Tianyu spoke up. “I kept the incision to half as long as my assistant said!”

And it was true: he had cut barely half of what Maomao had threatened. What was more, the stitches were as delicate as the incision; if all went well, the scar would be virtually invisible. Maomao couldn’t suppress a flash of annoyance even as she wrote down her instructions.

Wonder if she’ll really follow these.

She had her doubts—but she was very, very eager to get this over with and leave.

Chapter 2: The Strategist Strikes!

No sooner had they returned to the annex than they were summoned to Jinshi's chambers.

Like it couldn't wait till tomorrow!

It was the middle of the night; everyone but the guard on duty was sound asleep. The air was cold—and worse, Maomao hadn't eaten dinner. She was desperate to be done with this.

When she reached Jinshi's room, she discovered his desk riddled with abandoned drafts of numerous letters. Suiren or Taomei might have picked them up, had they been there; the fact they were still lying around showed that the ladies-in-waiting must really have their hands full. Maomao was clearly not the only one staying up late to work.

For a moment, she thought there was no one in the room—but then she happened to see Baryou peering out from behind a curtain. For a second, a charge went through the air between them, like two feral cats bumping into each other, and then Baryou vanished back behind his curtain without a word.

Something else, however, peeked out from behind the curtain in his stead: a duck with a black spot on her bill. Without Basen around, Baryou must be taking care of her. He wasn't much for human company, but maybe a duck was all right.

I feel like there's a real risk of her being eaten by Miss Chue. Apparently her husband's protection was enough to save the duck from the wife's cleaver.

"Oh, Maomao, you're here," said Suiren, who appeared from a back room. Maomao turned to her as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on.

"Yes, ma'am. I went to do a medical examination on Master Gyoku-ou's granddaughter. I think Miss Chue told you about it. Tianyu the physician was with me; he's at the medical office now."

He'd dumped the entire reporting-to-Jinshi thing on Maomao, on the grounds of "each doing what we're best at." When she thought of him sitting down to dinner—late, but still earlier than her—she privately vowed to serve him another cup of swertia tea. For now, she gave Suiren a

brief rundown.

"I'll go call the Moon Prince," the other woman said. Before she went, she collected the discarded letters and put them in a basket.

"That's an awful lot of false starts," Maomao remarked.

"He's just been writing letters to anyone he thinks he can count on. He must have written close to a hundred—no, two hundred, even."

"T—Two hundred?!"

From what Maomao could see of the attempted letters, each one began with the sort of fulsome, vacuous description of the season expected of a message from a member of the Imperial family. Yes, there was probably a more or less prescribed way to write such things, but even so, writing every single one of those letters by hand would have been enough to give a person tendinitis.

Maybe I should get a wet compress ready. Unfortunately, she'd come armed only with her usual bandages and balm.

Judging by the number of drafts lying around, Jinshi must have been corresponding not only with the most prominent bureaucrats, but the regional rulers as well.

"It's great that he's actually doing his job and all, but won't begging everyone in sight for help sort of...take away from his gravitas?"

Maomao's question provoked a sigh from Suiren—she seemed to agree that those who lived "above the clouds" shouldn't be quite so quick to send letters to those who lived below them.

"Do you suppose that's the sort of thing that would bother the Moon Prince?"

"No... No, I don't."

This was a man who had spent six years pretending to be a eunuch, a position that had given him a thorough familiarity with the slings and arrows of public opinion. He was probably less worried than anyone here about the rather coarse treatment he was receiving in the western capital.

"That's why we need *you* to say something to him, Maomao!" Suiren said. "But..."

"But what?"

"Well... Good luck." Suiren patted Maomao on the shoulder. For some reason, she was smiling.

Maomao soon discovered why, for Jinshi emerged from the bedroom. Chue and Gaoshun were with him, and from the moment Maomao saw the grin on Chue's face and the way Gaoshun was pressing a hand to his

forehead, she had a bad feeling about this.

Jinshi did not look like he was in a very good mood.

"Chue told me everything," he said. "I gather you *enjoyed* yourself at the farming village?"

Huh! Haven't seen him in this *kind of mood for a while,* Maomao thought. She wasn't very happy with Chue for squealing on her.

"You and this man Rikuson, it sounds like you're awfully *close*," Jinshi continued. Pretty much what she'd expected.

"I'm not sure I'd say that, sir," Maomao replied.

"Oh? Is that so?"

Yes? Yes. Yes, it's so. Maomao glared at him. Chue stuck her tongue out and playfully bopped herself on the forehead. Gaoshun looked at his daughter-in-law as if lost for words.

All right. I'm angry. What did you say to him? Yes, Maomao understood that Chue had only been doing her job. But knowing that only took her so far.

"Then why were you so intent on going with *him* specifically to that village?"

"Because I know one carriage is cheaper than two. Besides, I thought it might be useful if we could share information with each other."

"Hrm." Maomao's reasoning didn't seem to satisfy Jinshi.

"Can I go back now? I answered the summons because I assumed you wanted to know about the surgery, but considering the hour, maybe all this could wait till tomorrow?" She'd intended to check Jinshi's injury as well, but it looked like the thing to do was get out of here. The matter of Gyoku-ou's granddaughter could wait too.

A high wall, however, appeared in front of Maomao. *Thoom*. Jinshi had risen from his seat and was standing smack in front of her.

"Yes, sir?" she asked. Jinshi continued to look less than pleased.

"It has come to my attention that this man with whom you claim not to be especially close recently proposed marriage to you."

At least he was to the point.

"I'm given to understand that it was a joke, sir."

"Does one say such things in jest?"

"Perhaps it was a social nicety, like the hair stick Master Lihaku gave me at the garden party." She recalled Jinshi had been likewise petulant on that occasion. Maomao, for her part, had faith that there would be no problem if she was upfront and honest.

Jinshi fell silent. He looked like he very, very much wanted to say something, but—despite all appearances to the contrary—he was a busy man with much to do.

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In a bid to change the subject, Maomao decided to make the report she had come here expecting to make. “The surgery on Master Gyoku-ou’s granddaughter was a success. However, I’d like to continue doing periodic exams to check the progress of her recovery. I assume that will be all right?”

“Ah, yes... I’ve already been in touch with Sir Gyoku-ou. He tells me you may do as you see fit.”

“I see, sir.” Didn’t grandfathers usually dote on their granddaughters? Gyoku-ou’s answer seemed so...disinterested. Perhaps it only sounded that way because she was hearing it through Jinshi.

So he hates foreign blood, does he? Maomao thought, recalling what Gyoku-ou’s daughter had told her.

“And what was the trouble with the patient?” Jinshi asked, sitting in a chair.

Maomao let out a deep mental breath and resolved to avoid the subject of Rikuson in the future if at all possible. “It was an intestinal blockage. A foreign object stuck in her innards, which we removed in a surgical procedure. The actual surgery was handled by Tianyu, that new physician. I served as his assistant.”

“Hoh. Here I would have guessed you would be champing at the bit to do it yourself.”

“I would have been willing.” It was, after all, a rare opportunity to gain surgical experience with a relatively safe procedure, and Maomao was as eager as anyone to take advantage of it. “However, the simple fact is that Tianyu far outstrips me in surgical skill.”

“There’s a surprise.” Jinshi almost looked a little disappointed, as if he wished Maomao *had* performed the surgery.

The last thing I want is anyone complaining about my surgical treatment. Maybe it was too late with Jinshi—he knew about Maomao’s extensive, *personal* experience with poisons, and was also aware that she had once lopped off a man’s arm in the name of saving his life.

“So what was this blockage?” Jinshi asked.

“Trust me, sir, you’d rather not know.”

“Tell me it wasn’t grasshoppers.” Maomao saw him blanch a little.

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. The blockage was a lump of fruit and hair.”

“Hair?” Jinshi looked perplexed, and Chue and Gaoshun also glanced at Maomao, curious.

She gave them the summary. This included mentioning Gyoku-ou's distaste for foreigners, but that seemed to come as no shock to Jinshi. He simply said, "He hates foreigners, does he?"

"Do you have someone in mind, sir?" Maomao asked.

"Yes," he murmured, then intertwined his fingers and narrowed his eyes. "Are you aware of the relationship between Empress Gyokuyou and Sir Gyoku-ou?"

"Vaguely."

Some time ago, there had been a commotion when the Empress had lost a hair stick. Haku-u, a lady-in-waiting who was quite close with the Empress, had said a few things that came back to Maomao now.

"This is about the matter of Empress Gyokuyou's ladies-in-waiting, isn't it?" she asked.

"That's right. When I was in the central region, the Empress seemed to get along perfectly well with her brother."

"Only seemed to, sir?" Maomao gave him a puzzled look.

"I mean, I assumed—because during her time in the rear palace, she often got letters from 'her brother.' That was true, as far as it went—in that Gyoku-ou is not her only brother."

"Ah!"

Gyoku-ou and Gyokuyou were far enough apart in age to be father and daughter. It would be no surprise if there were other siblings between them.

"Once I realized that, I saw that there had been signs, even back when I was in charge of the rear palace. The minimal number of her ladies-in-waiting, for example, should have been a tip-off, don't you think?"

It was certainly true that Gyokuyou had had fewer ladies than the other upper consorts. Even the fact that Maomao, a simple laundry girl, had been admitted to the Jade Pavilion was only thanks to Jinshi's finagling. Yes, Gyokuyou had lost several ladies-in-waiting to food tasting, and her home was far away in the west, but it now transpired that such things had been only cover, excuses.

"Does Master Gyoku-ou view Empress Gyokuyou as an enemy, then? I mean, because he takes exception to her foreign blood?" asked Maomao.

"That, I don't know. For all his alleged hatred, he did send an adopted daughter who looks much like the Empress into the rear palace."

"With a pucker on his face, perhaps."

Had Gyoku-ou had some negative experience with foreigners in the

past? True, it was considered bad form to have strong preferences—in people as in food—but Maomao herself had people that she, ahem, couldn't stand. She was in no position to judge.

Nonetheless she said, "If he really hates foreigners, he must have a hard life. Living as he does in the one place in Li with more foreigners than anywhere else."

"That may be precisely the problem. More people, more points of friction."

Maomao was starting to feel that further discussion of this topic wouldn't get them much of anywhere. *Time to bail out of this subject.* She glanced around the room, looking for some chance to escape.

Just then, the door flew open with a crash. "Moon Prince!" In came a young personage with a duck on his head. In all the western capital, there was only one man who fit that description.

"You'll wake up half the household, Basen," Jinshi said, paying no heed to the avian.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's urgent..."

"Urgent? Well, what is it? Tell me!"

"Grand Commandant Kan is on his way here!"

"Does he know what time it is?"

Maomao's hair stood on end, and if she'd had a tail, it would have puffed right up. Since their arrival in the western capital, the grand commandant had visited Jinshi on several occasions, at which times Maomao had always been careful to make herself scarce, or otherwise to leave matters to the quack doctor.

"I'm here..." said a most terrible voice. Behind Basen loomed the face of an old man, a creature so filthy he just *looked* like his feet must stink. The duck seemed to mistake his hair for nesting material, because she reached over from atop Basen and pecked at his head.

"Basen!" Jinshi fixed the other man with a glare.

"I'm sorry, sir. The Grant Commandant is...already here," he said, correcting himself.

"Maomaoooooo! Thank goodness you're safe!" The monocled old fart tried to shove past Basen, but Basen didn't budge. The best the freak could do was sort of *shloop* himself in between Basen and the doorway.

Gaoshun immediately positioned himself to defend Jinshi, while Chue stood in front of Maomao and gave her a *let-me-handle-this* wink and a thumbs-up.

You can act as friendly as you want—it doesn't change the fact that you sold me out.

For the moment Maomao made it her priority to put some distance between herself and the old guy sidling in her direction.

"All those bugs must have been so scary, Maomao! But oooh, don't you worry. Daddy made a bug extermination squad and will get rid of all those nasty, nasty insects for you!"

Sure. This *is when he decides to get off his ass.*

Maomao and the freak strategist shuffled right, then left, stopped, and shuffled again, Chue between them.

Jinshi, observing the moment, cleared his throat to draw the strategist's attention to himself. "Sir Lakan. I believe I've asked you—repeatedly—to inform me before you come here. But since you're here, what is your business?" A blue vein bulged on Jinshi's forehead. He knew the answer to his question all too well.

For just a second, the strategist deemed to look at him. "Heavens. I don't *need* a reason to come visit my beloved daughter! I went to see her this evening and found she was out, so I just tried somewhere else." He gave them a sort of mischievous leer. Maomao felt bad to take the opportunity from Basen, who was holding his temper in check quite well, but she wondered if she might be allowed to give the strategist a good kick.

He returned his gaze to Maomao and grinned again, but then his face grew serious. "That was my main motivation for coming, anyway. But there is one more little thing. I'd like you to take the Sage in."

"The Sage? He's here?" Jinshi asked, disbelieving.

I think I recognize that name. As Maomao recalled, it was the man who had been watching Jinshi's game against the freak strategist in the Go tournament. The Emperor's personal instructor in the game.

"No, no, not him. Maybe I should call him the Western Sage. He's a prodigy in Shogi, not Go."

"Shogi?"

The freak strategist was a brilliant player of both games, but he was said to be even more dominant in Shogi than in Go. And yet here was someone he referred to as a "sage" of the game.

"He lost his home in the insect plague, you see. So he turned to me, an old friend."

Old friend, huh?

Maomao had heard that the strategist had spent some time in the provinces in his younger days. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that he had visited these distant western reaches.

"I see. Yes, there's been trouble all over," Jinshi said, and *hmm*ed thoughtfully.

"'Scuse meee!" Chue, with scant respect for the gravity of the moment, stuck her hand in the air. Her mother-in-law was absent today, so there was nothing to stop her. "Not to be rude, but do you think you might be making it all up?"

Rude—yes, it was, but Maomao agreed with the question. This was, after all, the freak strategist, a man who couldn't remember people's faces to save his life. If someone came along impersonating an old acquaintance, how would he know the difference?

"I doubt it. There aren't that many gold generals running around, although I do want to try to be certain."

A Gold General! Luomen had told Maomao that the strategist often spoke of people in terms of Shogi pieces, but the average listener would probably have no idea what he was talking about.

"So perhaps we could have a game of Shogi here, just to be sure?" the strategist suggested.

His idea was met with a moment of silence. Maomao wasn't sure how it followed that there should be a game here and now, but the aide trailing behind the Grand Commandant was carrying a splendid Shogi board. The strategist himself evidently considered the game a foregone conclusion.

"I reiterate... Do you know what time it is?" Jinshi said.

"Oh, please. If he's the real thing, you might gain some useful information yourself, Moon Prince." The freak gave Jinshi one of his unctuous smiles.

Jinshi glanced at Maomao. She tried to respond with a *don't-do-it* gesture, but from the moment the strategist had found her, there had been no escape. Better to let him waste his time playing his game, then—and anyway, she wondered at his ominous remark.

"All right. I'll provide a place for you to play Shogi. However, the game will wait until tomorrow."

"That's very kind of you, thank you indeed," the strategist said. (It was hard to tell whether he was genuinely grateful or not.) Maomao tried to ignore the freak, who was smiling to himself. Instead she rubbed her grumbling belly and hoped she could eat dinner soon.

Chapter 3: Big Lin

The next day, Chue all but dragged Maomao to a big room somewhere in the annex. It had been strung with mosquito netting, and there was a thick carpet on the ground.

Very Anan-esque, Maomao thought. There were no tables, just a couple of low-set chairs. Tea and snacks had been set out on the carpet—not the finest stuff; the swarm had curtailed such luxuries. But beggars could not be choosers.

In the center of the room was a Shogi board. Staring intently at it was one filthy old fart Maomao recognized, and another she didn't. The first fart was, of course, the freak strategist, but the second?

Must be his Shogi partner.

She'd heard the man was more than eighty years old. He must have been imposing in his day, but now he was hunched and his body shook visibly. A sturdy cane lay to his right, while behind him a middle-aged man, seemingly his caretaker, looked on with worry.

"I brought her!" Chue said with an enthusiastic raise of her hand. Maomao had, naturally, resisted the idea of coming here, but Chue had dragged her. Lihaku even accompanied them as her bodyguard.

The freak strategist looked up from the board. "Ma... Maom—" he began, but he was interrupted by what sounded like something striking a pillow. It was the cane, which had been pounded firmly into the carpet, so hard that Maomao feared it might have broken had it not been for the thick rug.

"We are in the middle of a game!" the other man bellowed, the force of his pronouncement shocking in light of his doddering appearance. Then he picked up one of his pieces and moved it forward, snapping it down with a perfect *click*.

The monocled freak narrowed his eyes and refocused on the board, sparing Maomao only a wave of his hand.

"Oooh, that was a nice move," said Chue, who was at least pretending to pay attention.

"If you say so! It's lost on me. You know what's going on there, Miss Chue?" Lihaku asked with a friendly laugh.

“Oh, it just seemed like the thing to say. You know, what with the way he smacked that piece down.”

She didn’t have any idea what the move meant; she’d just said what felt right to her. As usual.

“Now, come on, Miss Maomao. Let’s get some of that tea! Miss Chue needs it if she’s going to have her snack.”

Maomao and the others sat on the carpet. Summer in the western capital was warmer than in the central region, but at least it wasn’t as humid. The mosquito netting was, in fact, grasshopper netting, as some of the bugs were still around.

You can feel the money, Maomao thought, running her fingers through the carpet. It was cool like silk but soft like wool, and had a delicately woven pattern as well as embroidery. Even the netting was made of silk gauze, which shifted and shimmered with each passing breeze.

Maomao sat in one of the low chairs and took a bun, a fried mandarin roll topped with condensed milk added.

I guess it doesn’t matter how fancy the carpet is. You can still get crumbs on it.

The strategist was stuffing his face as he played, consuming the snacks with such gusto that his long-suffering aide struggled to keep them supplied.

“Onsooou! You can do it!” Chue called to him.

Onsou? Is that his name? Maomao hadn’t heard it before—she’d never really had a reason to—and even if she had, she probably would have forgotten it. It seemed likely she’d see more of Onsou in the future, though, so she would have to try to remember.

“Ha ha! Ol’ Onsou. It’s not easy being him, is it?” said Lihaku, not sounding terribly concerned. As a fellow soldier, he seemed to recognize the man.

When Onsou saw Maomao, he commanded a nearby servant to prepare enough snacks to make up the shortfall. He was obviously used to this. Once he had deposited a sufficient quantity of sweets in front of the strategist, he came over to Maomao. “I’m terribly sorry. I know he’s always dropping in on you.” He bowed to her, profoundly apologetic. The angle of his bow was flawless; clearly, this wasn’t the first time he’d had to say sorry on the strategist’s behalf.

This is good material, here. The old madam would have killed for someone who could apologize like that. Onsou wasn’t young enough to be

called a young man anymore, yet he knew how to be humble without looking pathetic or incompetent. Exactly the kind of person one needed when placating irate customers after some inexperienced courtesan had upset them. The real complainers, the ones who couldn't be satisfied by a heartfelt apology, could always be thrown out on their ears by the menservants.

I wonder if he'd be interested in a new line of work. I could introduce him.

Being the official apologizer for a brothel wasn't easy on the nerves, but it had to be better than being the freak strategist's personal assistant.

Jinshi wasn't there yet—maybe he wasn't coming at all.

If he's not careful, people might just get even more angry with him for being somewhere like this. At times of crisis such as the one they now faced, there was scant time for Shogi or banquets. This game was only being permitted because it was personally hosted by the freak strategist.

"Sure doesn't look like this guy is a fraudster," Maomao remarked. Anyone who could get the freak strategist to pay that much attention to a game of Shogi had to be quite the player themselves.

"No," Onsou agreed. "That's Big Lin, in the flesh."

"'Big Lin'... So is he famous or something?"

"Back in the day, they say Shogi players came from far and wide to play against him, even from the central region. He was that strong. If he hadn't fallen on hard times, he'd probably be even more well-known now."

"What happened?" Maomao asked, her interest piqued by the remark.

"Oh... Ahem. Well, since I'm sure I'd end up explaining it to you sooner or later, might as well get it out of the way. It's related to that useful information that Master Lakan mentioned." Onsou kept his voice down, mindful of the surly old man. "Big Lin was once a bureaucrat of some renown. He's quite thoroughly versed in the history of the western capital."

"I could believe it," Maomao said. The years had perhaps made him less obviously charismatic, but his full-throated shout earlier had convinced her he was by no means gone.

"If I told you his fate was decided seventeen years ago, would you know what I meant?"

"You're referring to the situation with the Yi clan?" Maomao's eyes widened.

“Yes, exactly. The Yi trusted Big Lin implicitly, and even after he retired from official life, he continued to compile their history. When the Yi were wiped out, however, many officials found themselves caught in the purge—especially those the Yi had trusted most. Big Lin emerged with his life, but the successive shocks of those events pushed him into senility.”

“That *is* useful information,” Maomao said. It implied that Big Lin might well know things Maomao and Jinshi would be very eager to learn. Then, however, Maomao made a sound of confusion. “Hold on. You seem awfully familiar with the fall of the Yi yourself, Onsou. Even Master Gaoshun doesn’t know much about it.” She looked at him and narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you didn’t know? Their destruction took place at exactly the time Master Lakan was in residence at the western capital. I’ve heard the stories, that’s all.”

Maomao glowered at the freak strategist as he played Shogi. I *haven’t.* Then again, she had never asked—but still, the thought made her unreasonably angry.

“Master Lakan being who he is, of course, most of his recollections consist of Go halls and Shogi dojos. Given his tendency to forget anything not of personal interest to him, I’m not sure he can offer the kind of information the Moon Prince may be hoping for. In this particular case, I suspect he only remembers as much as he does because he finds Big Lin himself memorable.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Maomao said. Asking the strategist detailed questions about the Yi would probably be futile, but they already knew that.

“If only Big Lin were still of sound mind, he could probably tell you a great deal about those times. From what I hear, he does have moments of lucidity...but only moments.”

“Moments,” Maomao repeated. She had, indeed, heard that people suffering from senility sometimes suddenly returned to their right minds. Onsou seemed to be suggesting that they should try to catch Big Lin during one of those spells.

“Indeed,” Onsou said. “Oh, Master Lakan is calling for me. I have to go. We can speak more about this later.” He bustled back over to the strategist—this time, the freak was out of juice.

Maomao peered around the large sitting room. She saw the freak

strategist, Onsou, and Big Lin, along with Big Lin's caretaker. Then there was herself, Chue, and Lihaku. Jinshi and his retinue were still nowhere to be seen.

Might not have a choice this time, Maomao thought. If Jinshi didn't show up, she and the others would have to try to get the information themselves. It would be pointless to try anything, though, before the Shogi game was over, so she decided to get more snacks instead.

"Miss Maomao, this fried bread is the best!" Chue informed her.

"How many of those have you had, Miss Chue?"

"I'm checking them for poison," she replied with a completely straight face.

"I can do that for myself, thank you."

The snacks that had been provided were indeed very tasty, but the tragedy of it was that there was no wine at all. Yes, yes, there was a food shortage; they were lucky to be able to eat at all, etc. They would just have to suck it up and endure.

While the strategist was sipping his refilled juice, Onsou returned to the onlookers. "Perhaps you would take this," he said, handing something to Maomao.

"What is it?" she asked.

He'd handed her a book. Made with parchment paper, it was a collection of short stories. She would have preferred an encyclopedia of medicinal herbs or maybe a medical treatise, but this wasn't a bad choice either.

"I can bring you any other books you need as well. Or perhaps you'd prefer board games and cards?" Onsou said. He was being so helpful toward Maomao and the others, in fact, that she was starting to get suspicious.

"Thank you for your consideration, but we'll be fine," she said pointedly.

"I... Well... Are you quite sure about that?" Onsou seemed distinctly ill at ease. "Master Lakan and Big Lin began their game two hours ago, and...well."

"Yes?"

"I think we can expect it to go on at least four hours more."

"F-Four...hours..."

"You may wish to know that the Moon Prince was here just before you were, but he left again. He said he was quite busy with work. I'm supposed

to call him when the game is over."

For Jinshi, there was no such thing as free time. If working until the game was done was the sensible thing to do, why couldn't Maomao leave too? There was plenty of medicine Dr. You had asked her to make.

"Do you think I could get out of here? You can call me when the game is over," she said, collecting a tray of fruit and buns. They would make the quack doctor, lately beset by the woes of a snackless life, very happy.

"I'm sorry, but no. If you were to leave now, Master Lakan would lose his concentration. And if he were to make any...unorthodox moves, Big Lin would get tired and fall asleep."

Argh! What a pain in the ass. Maomao did worry that, after another four hours of Shogi, the eighty-year-old man might simply keel over. *One more reason I can't leave...*

She would have to stay and make sure that the old guy didn't collapse. She compromised as best she could, having her mortar, pestle, and medicinal ingredients brought and mortar-ing away with Chue and Lihaku while the old men played.

Is that guy going to last? she wondered as she crushed some herbs and watched Big Lin, whose hand trembled every time he moved a piece. Once in a while, the man attending him would press some damp cotton to Big Lin's lips. Other times, he would help Big Lin to his feet, then take him to the bathroom.

Looks like he's used to nursing.

The other man must have been more than forty himself—a son, or perhaps more likely, a grandson. It looked like maybe Big Lin's continued survival was thanks to this man's patient ministrations.

When Onsou next came by to check on them, Maomao motioned him over. "Who's the man with Big Lin?" she asked.

"Some extended relative. Big Lin has no more close family. Master Lakan always refers to him as Small Lin."

"Small Lin?"

Small. That could certainly refer to a child, but just as often it meant someone who was small-hearted, a jerk. Even if the usage was simply a pair with "Big Lin," it still wasn't a particularly polite thing to call a person. In that respect, it was very much in character for the freak strategist.

So it went, precious time slipping through Maomao's fingers.

After an hour, they had filled a tray with round pills. Onsou, who

seemed less nervous around them than with the strategist, was hard at work helping them with the task. Maomao shook the tray to straighten out the rows—and at just that moment, Big Lin slumped over.

Shocked, Maomao rushed to the players.

"Oh! Maomao," the freak strategist said with a grin. She shoved him aside, out of the way, and went to tend the other old man.

Before she could even reach him, though, someone shouted, "Nothing's wrong!" It was Small Lin, who propped up Big Lin and leaned in as the old man began to whisper something.

"Yes... Yes," Small Lin said. Maomao couldn't hear what Big Lin was saying, but Small Lin was taking it down. Maomao took a peek, only to discover rows of writing whose meaning she couldn't fathom.

At length Big Lin's dictation seemed to end. Small Lin rubbed the man's back gently and wetted his lips with the cotton rag.

"All finished, Small Lin?" the freak strategist asked with a glance at Maomao.

"He's exhausted. We should let him rest," Small Lin replied, evidently unbothered by the strategist's tone. He laid the elderly man down gently, then began taking a record of the state of the game board.

"Caretaking's not easy, huh?" said Chue as she grabbed another bun—this time from the strategist's plate—and stuffed it into her mouth. She sounded totally indifferent on the subject. Maomao worried for Gaoshun and Taomei in their old age.

"Maomaaaooo!" cried a lilting voice. The strategist began to work his way over to her.

Maomao frowned in disgust. "Please don't get any closer. You smell like a dog that's been out in the rain."

"Wow, that...really sounds hurtful when you just say it like that," Lihaku remarked.

For better or worse, however, the personage involved was impervious to nearly anything Maomao might say. "I heard you like salty snacks, so I made sure to have lots and lots of them on hand! How about some wine? Would you like some? I can get it for you!"

"Wine..." Just for a second, Maomao felt something tug at her heart, but then she shook her head vigorously.

The scowl on her face must have been truly terrible, because Chue intervened. "If you're offering, Miss Chue would love some specially made fruit wine! Also, because we do technically have a job to do here,

maybe you could tell me about the old guy over there."

Ah, Chue. Pleasure before business. From beside her, Lihaku could be heard to say, "The wine can wait, thanks."

The strategist, meanwhile, looked at Chue, perplexed. "The Knight, you mean?"

He compared the man not to a Go stone, but a Shogi peace. In other words, this was someone who stood out to him as distinctive. He was, as ever, an astute judge of character if nothing else.

"If you want to know about my granduncle, please allow me to explain," said Small Lin, walking up. Big Lin was snoozing comfortably.

Almost by instinct, everyone formed a loose circle around the snacks. Chue made tea and served it to the others. Maomao put individual plates in front of each of them, and meanwhile slid the various medicines and pharmaceutical tools to one side.

"May I ask what you've already heard about him?" Small Lin said, regarding Maomao and the others calmly. He might not look like much, but at least he knew how to be polite. Onsou had said his family had fallen on hard times, but he at least seemed to have had a respectable upbringing. He even spoke courteously to Maomao and Chue.

His granduncle, huh? Small Lin looked to be about forty years old. His hair was black, but looked temperamental, and his eyes were pale.

Big Lin has something of the look of a foreigner about him, himself. He had the angular nose people with foreign blood so often possessed, although his thinning hair and eyebrows were white—it was impossible to say what color they had once been. What hair he had was unkempt; maybe he didn't like to tie it back.

It was unusual to see a man of Small Lin's age taking such close care of a granduncle. Did he really have no other relatives?

"I've heard him referred to as a living encyclopedia of the history of the western capital," said Onsou. The strategist, meanwhile, was trying to press snacks on Maomao, so Chue interposed herself between them. Evidently she still had space left in her stomach, for the treats disappeared quickly.

"Yes, people called him that once. But now he's...well, you see. He was in full possession of all his faculties until the events of seventeen years ago."

"You mean the suppression of the Yi clan, yes?" Onsou asked, helpfully making sure Maomao and the others could follow. Maomao was

glad she'd gotten some of this story ahead of time.

He really knows how to get things done. Onsou wasn't showy about it, but he gave a nudge here or a push there to keep things moving smoothly. He had obviously not been long in the service of a superior who only knew how to upset orders and thwart plans.

"Yes, that's right. During the campaign, he was attacked and hit in just the wrong spot." Small Lin lifted some of Big Lin's thinning hair to reveal a prominent scar. "At the time, my granduncle had been charged with compiling a history of the western capital. When the Yi were subdued, however, he too was taken to be a rebel. Perhaps we can count ourselves lucky that at least the rest of his family escaped punishment."

A wrinkle formed in Small Lin's brow, a sign of how hard it was for him to recount these things.

"*Suppression* is a very lofty-sounding word, but it was no more than a rampage. My granduncle was arrested, and they burned not only the history he had compiled, but all the books and scrolls upon which he based his work. When he finally came back to us months later, he was...like this. His closest relatives abandoned him. Only my father would take him in."

Perhaps Big Lin's symptoms were the result of seeing his life's work confiscated and destroyed, or perhaps of simple violence. Being forsaken by his family might have been even worse.

"There was so much precious information in those records. To this day, I regret their destruction!" Small Lin pounded the carpet demonstratively.

Easy to burn things... Not so easy to un-burn them.

Maomao's mind was still on the strange notes Small Lin had taken down as he listened to his granduncle. What did they mean? If he was trying to reconstruct the histories from the old man's mumblings, it would be a tall order.

Onsou looked at Maomao as if to say that he was leaving the rest in her hands.

As for what the freak strategist was up to at that moment, his face had turned red and he was getting tipsy. He was holding a glass bottle. Maomao was trying to focus on the conversation, but she couldn't avoid looking at him.

Looks like he mixed up his juice and the fruit wine. It was clear to her that the strategist had mistakenly drunk the wine Chue had wanted. Chue took the bottle from him, stuck out her tongue playfully, and then started drinking.

Come on, leave some for me! Maomao thought. She tried to send the message to Chue telepathically, but there didn't seem to be much hope that it would reach her. Resigned, she turned back to Small Lin.

"What do we need to do to reach Big Lin's memories, then?" she asked.

"My granduncle is a very careful person. For example, he would never have put all his books, which might so easily be burned, in one place. If you're looking for records, I'm sure he's hidden them somewhere."

"Meaning you think he had another library besides the one that was burned?"

"Yes, I do."

If Big Lin had kept copies of his books in another location, then the records might still exist. There was just one catch.

"If you haven't found them, it means no one knows where they are."

"That's right. No one's found this library. Even the idea that the books might all be there is simply a possibility."

It was like clutching at mist—but at least the idea of a separate library had a ring of plausibility.

Maomao looked at the old man, who was breathing peacefully. The freak strategist truly was nothing but a thorn in her side—but every once in a while, he could be helpful.

"I suppose, then, that you take advantage of his moments of lucidity to attempt to find out where the library is," she said. It would require someone with great patience to do such a thing.

"You really think you can find it that way?" Chue piped up, coming right out with what Maomao was trying to hint at.

Small Lin took a sip of his tea, as if unsure whether to say what he said next. Then he replied, "In fact, they've been found before."

Maomao's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Indeed. I gather someone sought out the house my granduncle used to live in, based on the snatches of things he remembered. And when they found it..."

"Yes? What happened?"

"There they were! Game records my granduncle had secreted away long ago, hidden beneath the floorboards."

"Game records," Maomao repeated. Frankly, that sounded pretty worthless. "I'm guessing everyone was pretty disappointed. After all that searching and everything."

It seemed possible that these relatives had taken Big Lin in partly because they thought there might be a legacy in it for them.

“Yes, most disappointed. I’m told they used the records for kindling in their oven.”

To think, those papers had probably been priceless treasures to Big Lin. Value was in the eye of the beholder, and it could make life so cruel.

“Gee, that seems like such a shame. They might even be worth something if they were still around,” said Chue, who was still sipping away at the wine. Seriously, she could at least leave a cup’s worth.

“You are so right,” Small Lin concurred. “Someone even came to me who wanted to sell those game records, once they heard how gifted my granduncle was at Shogi.”

“Sell them?” Maomao asked. There was a scheme that sounded familiar.

“Oh, yes. It seems that Go is all the rage in Kaou Province, and that there’s a very popular book featuring collected games. This person wondered if a book of Shogi games might meet with similar success.”

Maomao stole a glance at the old fart, who was now snoring placidly. Somehow the world continued to live in his shadow, though neither he nor the world knew it.

“His family was nearly frantic when they learned there might have been money in those games, but before they could figure out what to do, the swarm came... The family found out somewhere that Master Lakan was an old friend of my granduncle’s and, though I’m embarrassed to say it, they prevailed upon him to beg help.”

Small Lin was red up to his ears, humiliated even to tell the story. Maomao was well aware that there were some less than ideal families out there, but the more poverty-stricken you were the less sentimental you could be. If they had never fallen on hard times, they might have been a perfectly fine group of people. Maybe it was Maomao’s twisted personal viewpoint that made the devout, attentive Small Lin seem, in fact, the strangest of all.

“I think the rare pleasure of playing Shogi with Master Lakan has brought some of my granduncle’s spark back. I realize this may seem a rather impertinent request, but when the game is over, do you think the written records of it might be granted to us?”

“I guess I don’t see why not,” Maomao said. The freak strategist didn’t seem likely to care.

“Then, supposing that my granduncle’s mutterings lead to another hidden cache of papers or old game records?”

“We’ll give all the game records to you.”

“Lady Maomao,” Onsou said, visibly concerned.

“The freak strategist doesn’t have any special interest in records of old games, does he?” she asked.

“No, but if he *were* to say anything...”

“Just blame it on me.”

“I certainly shall!” Onsou had obviously just wanted to get a firm verbal commitment from Maomao. The man was thorough.

That left only the question, the crucial question, of where these books and papers might possibly be.

“Do you still have those things you wrote down earlier? Could we see them, perchance?” Maomao asked politely.

“Here. I also have all the notes I’ve made thus far,” Small Lin said. He produced a collection, not of sheets of paper or even wooden writing strips, but scraps of parchment.

“These look like game records too,” Maomao said, puzzled. The scraps contained inscriptions like “S59” and “+B83.” Even Maomao, who had no interest in Shogi whatsoever, recognized this as notation showing how the pieces in a Shogi match had moved. This notation involved foreign numerals not used in Kaou Province, perhaps for ease of reading.

Does this seriously mean anything? Maomao held back a groan. Instead she turned to Onsou and asked, “Do you have another Shogi board and some pieces we could borrow?” When you didn’t understand something, there was nothing better than to try it out.

Onsou furnished the materials, and with a *click-click-click*, Maomao began to line up the pieces.

“Let’s see... S59 would be...” She tried to put the pieces where the notes indicated, but increasingly she suspected it was a futile endeavor. She was just about to place one of the Pawns when she stopped.

“Now, that’s funny,” Chue interjected, looking at the board. “It says that Pawn should move to row two.”

“Huh! Even I know that’s an illegal move.” Now Lihaku was getting in on the act.

“And there are three Dragons too. That’s not normal. Maybe not all of these notes relate to the same game,” Onsou said, peering at the board. “I wonder if this would make more sense to me if I knew more about Shogi.”

“You aren’t well-versed in the game, sir?” Maomao asked.

“I know how to play, more or less, but please remember whom I serve under. I’m not eager to turn a pastime into yet another job.” Onsou had a dead look in his eyes.

“Boy, I feel that!” Lihaku said, not looking much better.

“Why’s that, Master Lihaku? You don’t serve directly under the strategist... In fact, I don’t think you have much to do with him at all, do you?” Maomao asked. Lihaku was a soldier, true enough, but he saw far less of the freak strategist than Onsou did.

Instead of answering, Lihaku said, “Look at this outline. Doesn’t it remind you of a map of the capital?”

“The capital?”

“A city set in a perfect grid, with the throne at the top. It’s right there!”

“Ah... I think I see what you mean.”

In short, Lihaku couldn’t look at a Go board without seeing the capital. *This being a Shogi setup, it’s not exactly the same, but still.* She understood what he was getting at. As a soldier who spent much of his time guarding the royal city, he saw a lot of maps of the place.

“Let’s start by lining up all the pieces from the notes,” Maomao said. There followed a series of clicks as she put the pieces in place—but they turned out to be distinctly clustered in one part of the board. “Does this look like a Shogi game to you?”

“Not much of one,” Small Lin said. He seemed to be the most Shogi-capable person left awake, with Big Lin and the strategist both off in dreamland. It wasn’t clear how much Chue knew about the game, so Maomao would discount her opinion.

“If it’s not a Shogi game, what do you think it is?” Maomao asked, raising her hand in a gesture of total defeat.

“Yeah, the King piece is really flying around everywhere,” Lihaku said.

“Miss Chue had the same thought! That Jade General really gets around.”

Maomao agreed with her companions. The Jade General, which normally moved one slow square at a time, had worked its way all the way to the center of the board.

“Jade,” Maomao murmured, gazing at the board. “*Gyoku*.”

The King, the opposing leader, sat smack in the center on the northern side of the board. A number of other pieces likewise seemed oddly out of

position.

"Master Lihaku," Maomao said.

"Yeah?"

"If you were to picture this Shogi board as the capital, how would it look to you?" She turned the board so he could see it.

"Hmm... I guess this King piece would have to represent the throne. Which would mean..." He gestured at the clusters of pieces. "These places where the pieces are all bunched up would have to be the market or the merchant district, or maybe a residential area."

"What about the Jade General, then?"

"Huh... Maybe an enemy? A political enemy? Or maybe that's the house of a particularly powerful bureaucrat?" He didn't sound very sure.

Yes! That would make sense!

Maomao looked at Chue. "Miss Chue, do you have a map of the western capital?"

"Ha ha!" Lihaku laughed. "You say the strangest things. Who would carry a—"

"Here you go!" Chue pulled a map, drawn on parchment, out of the folds of her robes.

"Why do you have that?!" Lihaku exclaimed, supplying the quip in lieu of the absent Lahan's Brother.

"Because I'm Miss Chue!" she declared. Indeed, Maomao knew she was; that was why she'd asked. It turned out she'd been right to do so.

Maomao opened the map and compared it to the Shogi board. "You see the Jade General here? If you match it with the map of the western capital, doesn't it look like it corresponds exactly to this annex?"

The others almost jumped. Everyone crowded around, looking from the map to the board and back.

The western capital, like the royal capital in the central region, had been laid out in a grid pattern, with distinct sectors. But the divisions weren't as neat as the royal capital, so they'd missed the resemblance.

"Then that would make the King piece..."

"The administrative office or Master Gyokuen's residence, perhaps. But I would guess the office. That's the location of the mansion that the Yi clan occupied seventeen years ago," Small Lin told them. It was so helpful to have a local around, someone who could fill them in on past events.

"That would explain all the dragons around here," Maomao said. "If I remember correctly, there was a store with the word *Dragon* in its name."

Actual dragon designs were supposed to be taboo to everyone except members of the Imperial family, but sometimes the *word* "dragon" would sneak into the name of a shop. It was considered to be good luck.

"What about these, then?" Chue asked, pointing to the two Pawns in a row.

"From the position, they seem to be along the main thoroughfare," Maomao said.

"Maybe they represent a bookstore or a stationary shop? You know, somewhere you'd go to buy little things."

"Hmm. Not sure I remember anyplace like that," Lihaku muttered.

Piece by piece, Maomao tried to figure out what the Shogi tiles represented.

Then Chue said, "Miss Chue has a thought. Maybe a *current* map can't help us."

She was right. In seventeen years, shops could come and go, some businesses collapsing while other, new enterprises began.

"If you'll pardon me, I can go get an old map! Please, look after my granduncle for a moment," Small Lin said, getting to his feet. Big Lin was still sleeping.

"I'll go call the Moon Prince, then. Lady Maomao, if you would look after Master Lakan, please," Onsou said, also standing.

"Look after Big Lin, got it," Maomao said.

"No! I need you to keep an eye on Master Lakan!" Onsou was distraught, but left anyway. Maomao and the others lost themselves in comparing the Shogi board and the modern map. The comparisons seemed to be going very well.

So well that all of them missed something crucial.

Chapter 4: Small Lin

Maomao surveyed the map, which was now covered in writing. “I think we filled in most of the places we’re sure about.” They’d divined the significance of about half of the pieces, and what they saw conveyed how much the town had changed.

“The Moon Prince has a visitor and can’t join us. He’s with Vice Minister Lu from the Board of Rites,” Onsou informed them when he returned. His tardiness in getting back seemed to be explained by the thick book clutched under his arm—he must have gone to get it. Presumably it belonged to the freak strategist.

“Vice Minister?” Maomao wasn’t especially well-versed in formal titles. She vaguely remembered this one having appeared on the court ladies’ service exam, but she’d forgotten what exactly the position entailed. The name, she thought she recognized as one that Dr. You had mentioned.

“He’s basically the second-most-important person on the Board of Rites,” Chue whispered in Maomao’s ear. “Any ceremonial functions the Moon Prince might perform here will need somebody important like that.”

“I see.” She didn’t know what business might have brought Vice Minister Lu to visit Jinshi, but she figured they could manage this without him.

“Man, what’s keeping that guy?” Lihaku asked, looking out past the mosquito netting at the setting sun. “It’s been more than half an hour already. I knew I should’ve gone with him.”

“You’re not wrong. Small Lin *is* just a visitor. With the way he looks, I’ll bet one of the guards stopped him,” Chue said. She and Lihaku were known around the mansion, and nobody gave them any problems. But if Small Lin had left the premises...

“Maybe I should have gone instead,” Maomao said—but she soon realized she was wrong.

“Fwaaah,” yawned the monocled old fart, finally waking from his alcohol-induced slumber. “G’morning... Oh, I must still be dreaming. I can see Maomao.” Onsou offered his torpid master a wake-up drink. His beloved juice, presumably. “Hrm?! That *is* Maomao!”

“Ugh. Here we go.”

Oops. Had she said that out loud?

She wished she could just ignore the strategist, but then they would never learn what they needed to know, so instead she made a row of snack trays between the two of them. “You are not allowed to go beyond this line,” she said.

“Wow-ee! That’s like something my big sister Maamei would come up with!” She must have done something similar to Chue’s father-in-law, Gaoshun.

Maomao had the Shogi board placed in front of the freak. “I have no idea whether to expect an answer from you, but I’m going to ask. Specifically, my question concerns the western capital seventeen years ago. If this is the Yi clan mansion, and this building diagonally down from it is Master Gyokuen’s residence, do you know what the other pieces would signify? Ah, I thought not. Thanks anyway.”

“Um, the old fart hasn’t answered yet,” Lihaku said, not hesitating to use the name “old fart” right in front of the old fart.

The old fart, however, seemed unperturbed. Indeed, the fox-like gleam in his eyes grew even sharper, and he reached toward the board with hands that bore the distinctive calluses of a Shogi player.

“This Pawn here, this would be the Shogi dojo. The one underneath it —there was this store that sold Shogi and Go supplies.”

“Master Lakan has a steel-trap memory for things that happen to interest him,” Onsou explained helpfully.

“Huh. Is that so?” Maomao replied, as *un*interested as could be.

“This dragon is a restaurant. If you could beat the owner at a game of Shogi, your meal was free. But after three free meals, they cut me off.”

The strategist was downright voluble now. It was beginning to become clear that the places Big Lin had indicated were mostly related somehow to Shogi.

Maomao couldn’t help thinking *If only this guy had his act together...*

“This Knight, I’m not sure about. This Promoted Gold too.” Those two locations alone seemed to elude the strategist.

“One of them seems to be a shrine. The other is somewhere in the residential district, so maybe it’s where the game records were first found,” Chue said, circling the locations on the map.

“I guess that makes the shrine the only other suspicious place, then,” Lihaku said.

Just when it felt like they were finally about to figure out some answers, the strategist started looking around, his eyes sweeping the room.

"What's the matter, sir?" Onsou asked.

"Where's Small Lin?" the strategist demanded.

"He went to fetch an old map."

"Hrm."

How unusual for the strategist to show any interest in another person.

I might have expected him to ask about Big Lin, maybe, but Small Lin... Maomao thought. Then she repeated to herself, *"Small" Lin...*

She smacked the Shogi board, causing everyone to look at her in surprise. "What's wrong?" Lihaku asked.

Maomao jumped to her feet and scowled at the freak strategist. There were those in the world who possessed rare talent, but let it go to waste. "The 'small' of Small Lin," she said, her gaze still fixed squarely on the freak. "May I take it that it means 'bad'? Is that why you call him that?"

"Well, yes. Maomao, I don't really know the difference between good people and bad, he just strikes me as a liar."

Maomao, still frowning, sat back down. "Why didn't you say that?"

"Well, what's it got to do with me?"

Ah, yes. There was the strategist she knew.

Everyone else in the room sat in stunned silence. Then a hesitant voice came from the entrance. "Ahem. Pardon me for interrupting when you're in conference..." Judging by his uniform, the newcomer was one of the freak strategist's subordinates.

"Yes? What is it?" asked not the freak, but Onsou.

"There seems to be someone at the administrative office who claims to be looking for a missing member of their family." The soldier stole a glance at Big Lin, who was still sleeping in a corner of the room. "His description matches that of an old man dragged here by Master Lakan yesterday..."

The silence grew even more stunned, and then another soldier appeared at the door. "Master Lakan, there's been a fire at the west shrine. I've already dispatched a firefighting squad to take care of it."

The freak's subordinates really were all highly capable people. They didn't even need their boss to tell them to do what was appropriate and necessary.

The missing family member was Big Lin. The burning shrine was the one they had just concluded would be worth investigating.

It was almost *satisfying,* in its own perverse way, to have been so thoroughly played.

Nobody knew who had set these events in motion. At the moment, all they knew was that whoever it was, they seemed to be two steps ahead.

They relocated their conference to Jinshi's chambers, where the three of them—Maomao, Chue, and Lihaku—now knelt meekly. They'd thought the freak strategist might follow them, but Big Lin had woken up from his nap, so the Shogi game had resumed.

"I can only offer my humblest apologies," Maomao said. She and the others had their heads pressed to the ground in abject apology, and Chue was even dressed in a white robe as if prepared to disembowel herself at any moment.

"Er, Chue... There will be no need for that," Jinshi said. With evident relief, Chue promptly changed back.

In short, "Small Lin" didn't exist. There *was* a man who claimed to be a relative of Big Lin's, but he was a different person, someone who didn't look all that much like Small Lin.

"Small Lin" kidnapped Big Lin during the insect swarm, then took advantage of the fact that Big Lin isn't coherent to pose as a relative to try to get close to the freak strategist.

He'd certainly pulled the wool over Maomao's, and everyone else's, eyes. He was such a diligent caretaker to Big Lin that he looked like he'd been doing it for a long time. What was worse, he seemed to be aware of the strategist's ability to see through lies, and he knew that as long as the old fart had a worthy opponent to play Shogi with, he would focus on that instead of on Small Lin's deception.

If he hadn't known about the special qualities that creature possessed, then he had been extraordinarily lucky—and if he had, then he was a master tactician himself.

Big Lin was now with his real family. The man who had come asking after him had been accompanied by a young woman—his wife or daughter, perhaps—who was Big Lin's actual nurse. Maomao and company were glad to discover that Big Lin hadn't been abused and abandoned the way Small Lin had described, but judging by the state of the visitors' clothing, the part about the family falling on hard times had been true.

They were with Big Lin now, keeping an eye on him as he played

Shogi.

Maomao was frustrated. She knew that having the freak strategist around would only see them veering off topic at every opportunity. She intended to explain the situation to Jinshi, thoroughly and completely, and only then bring in the strategist to get his story.

If the old fart would've just told us, she thought, but there was no predicting what he'd do. She wasn't even sure what it was that had tipped him off that Small Lin was a villain. He had done a superb job of looking completely harmless.

He took such convincing care of Big Lin. I wonder if he actually does have nursing experience. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain how he had deceived all of them so completely. If it was just a performance, it was a very good one. Even Chue had been taken in—not something Maomao would have expected, even if someone managed to trick herself and Lihaku.

"He even fooled you, Chue?" Jinshi asked.

"Yes, and I'm so embarrassed! In my family home, a little beating wouldn't be enough to make up for a screwup like this!" She mimed copious weeping.

Is Chue's family that ruthless? Maomao wondered. She'd assumed it must have been a very laissez-faire place to produce a free spirit like Chue—but that was all it had been. An assumption.

"What's done is done," Jinshi said. "But please, describe this person to me."

"You didn't see him, Master Jinshi?" Maomao asked.

"Only a glimpse of his face. I had a visitor and had to come straight back to my room."

Fair enough—the Emperor's younger brother wouldn't normally stand around and chat with a random commoner.

"But you're done entertaining now, sir?"

"Yes. When I mentioned that Sir Lakan was about, the man looked slightly ill and went home. Apparently Sir Lakan and Vice Minister Lu don't entirely get along. The vice minister was advising me on what we should do about the ceremonies we had planned for this visit."

Is there anyone who does *get along with the old fart?* Who really knew how to cope with the monocled freak?

"I want to know everything about this man. How he acted, what he was like," Jinshi said—not to Maomao, but to Chue.

“Yes, sir. He was a completely and totally normal man. His facial features suggested a hint of foreign blood, but otherwise, he had no distinguishing characteristics at all. Maybe it would help if I described him as being a lot like Lahan’s Brother?”

Ahh...

Maomao thought that actually made sense. No wonder this guy had been able to blend in so readily. He wasn’t given to outbursts like Lahan’s Brother was, but he shared the other man’s ability to just go about his business, never really standing out. And they had the exact same quality of put-upon-ness.

“One thing about them really stands out,” Maomao said.

“Oh yes, for sure,” Chue said.

Then they chorused: “The way you can’t seem to remember their faces!”

“I will try, though!” Chue said. “I’ll see if I can do a likeness.” She immediately produced a brush and started painting, and soon had a portrait that captured Small Lin’s salient characteristic of having no real salient characteristics. Maomao assumed the portrait would be shown to Big Lin’s family.

“All right. And what *kind* of man do you think he was? You can give me your personal opinions; I’ll take anything.” This time, Jinshi’s gaze took in Maomao and Lihaku as well.

“If I may, then, sir,” Lihaku said. “I mostly agree with Miss Chue. This guy was totally ordinary. But he also seemed to really know what he was doing with Big Lin.”

“He was accustomed to his role, you mean? Was his performance really that good?”

“It was more than that. It’s like, I’m not sure most people would know how to work that well with an old guy. You don’t usually think of men taking care of their elderly relatives anyway, right? It’s usually their wife or sister.”

Maomao nodded. In Li, men stood above women in the social hierarchy. The impulse only seemed stronger here in I-sei Province, where women or brides were frequently viewed as nothing more than tools. Witness the fact that it wasn’t the man who’d come looking for Big Lin who was caring for him, but the woman he’d brought with him.

“And what do you think, Maomao?”

“I agree with the others. However, if he has indeed been searching for

Big Lin's old letters and papers the way we are, then I think we can assume he's been doing it far longer than we have." Either Small Lin himself, or perhaps a compatriot, had been staking out Big Lin.

"Yes, that would be reasonable," said Jinshi.

He didn't seem to be actively searching for the cache so much as keeping watch to see if anyone else would find it. It seemed like an awfully roundabout way to get what he claimed to want. If nobody found the papers, fine. Small Lin just didn't want them discovered.

"Do you think it's safe to assume that there was something so damaging in those materials that he wanted to eliminate them, even if it carried a considerable risk?" Maomao asked.

"To the point of deliberately making contact with Sir Lakan?"

"When you can't predict what someone is going to do, when they finally do act, it can be earth-shattering."

"Ahh." Jinshi nodded quickly. Lakan did have a gift for jinxing things.

So whatever it is, he doesn't want it to be found. Secret accounts, maybe? No, wait. What would that have to do with the compiling of a history?

"I wonder what could be worth that kind of risk," Lihaku said.

"Maybe it has to do with the Yi rebellion," Chue suggested.

"If he doesn't want it to be found, then I think it's safe to figure that whatever's in there isn't something he *wants* to know, but something he *already* knows," said Maomao.

If he went out of his way to burn the library, it must really be something he doesn't want getting out. Maomao found herself pondering why Small Lin might have deliberately set fire to the books. Hadn't he considered the possibility that the destruction might not be complete if Maomao and the others came right away?

What if he only pretended *to burn them?*

If the books were burned, their pursuers might give up—but they might also try desperately to decode any remaining fragments of text. There were no guarantees that fire would consume everything, after all.

What if he only absconded with what he needed?

What was it that Small Lin needed, then? Maomao thought about it so hard that her head started to spin.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the door flew open. "Maomao! I wooon!"

"Yeah, great."

If only he'd warned them about Small Lin like a normal person would have... But no, it was no use being angry. The freak strategist had told her that he hadn't said anything about Small Lin being a bad guy because no one had asked him. Well, she would try asking him a few things, then.

"How did you know that man was a charlatan?"

"Because watching him was like watching an interesting play."

Maomao stopped. No, she still had no idea what anything he said meant. What would Lakan know about watching a play? The performers would all look like Go stones to him.

"Everyone on the stage is lying, but some of the performers are better at it than others. The more natural the falsehoods are, the more interesting the play is," the strategist said.

"The more natural, the more interesting..."

It made a certain kind of sense to her. A play was something fundamentally untrue, and the actors people who specialized in delivering these untruths to the audience. The better liars they were, the better performers they made, and the more engaging the drama was. The idea that someone might be a liar and a villain because watching them gave the sense of watching a good stage play was the sort of conclusion only the freak strategist could have come up with.

"Ahhh. Yeah, that sort of makes sense," Chue said as it clicked for her. Maybe it made sense because she, like the strategist, lived by her intuition.

"Does it? Maybe you could explain it to me," Maomao said.

"Yes, of course, Miss Chue's explanation incoming! This was someone who wasn't playing a part—they'd *become* that part. You see it sometimes, among con artists and spies."

"Spies?"

"Oh yes! Some agents even marry a local so that they won't be suspected when they enter another country. But that spouse, you see them every single day. The spy has to be a true husband or wife to them. They can't just act like it, they have to *be* it. The only thing is that there's something more important to them than their partner. Some spies might even have kids! As long as no one finds out what they are, their family will never know the difference."

Talk about ignorance being bliss. Chue's description was awfully full of...concrete details, though. It almost seemed to suggest...no. In any case, the point was that Small Lin had, for all intents and purposes, become a real member of Big Lin's family.

“Say, Maomao, why don’t we have dinner together?” the freak strategist said. He still looked relaxed and very pleased with himself, totally oblivious to the mood in the room. From behind him, Big Lin’s *real* relative was watching them. He did indeed look like he was living a hard life—almost everything Small Lin had told them appeared to be the truth, except for his own identity. Onsou gave the man some money on behalf of his master.

Then he said to the strategist, “Master Lakan, you already have a dinner engagement with Master Gyoku-ou. And we need to spend the time until then getting through some work.”

Yes, this man was indeed a hard worker.

“Aww, I don’t wanna!” the old fart moaned. Pathetic. He wrapped himself around a post and refused to move as Onsou tried to drag him away. Children throwing tantrums comported themselves with more dignity.

“Miss Maomao, a word from you would be helpful here. Tell him ‘Have fun!’ or something.”

“I don’t want to, Miss Chue.”

“Would you rather he stay here, Miss Maomao?”

Maomao scowled and managed to choke out “Have fun” in the quietest possible voice.

The strategist’s face lit up. “I will! I will have fun!”

Maomao watched Onsou begin to lead him away. “Just one more question,” she said before he was out of earshot.

“Yes? What is it? You can ask your daddy anything!”

She really, really wanted to smash that monocle, but she forced herself to ignore the urge. “How does Master Gyoku-ou look to you?”

She felt like the answer to this one question held the key to everything. Even Jinshi swallowed heavily, wondering what the strategist would say.

But what he said was: “Gyoku-ou? Who’s that?”

“The man you’re having dinner with tonight! The one who keeps you swimming in fruit juice!” Maomao said.

“Ohh! Him,” the freak said, clapping his hands. “I think he must have wanted to be an actor. He seems like he’s smack on his way to becoming a hero.”

“Huh?” Maomao started to feel like she was wasting her time with this line of questioning. A *hero* in this case was a male stage role, usually a warrior or sometimes a chivalrous gambler.

Maomao only found herself with even more questions than before; she started to feel the mental equivalent of indigestion. It didn't help when Chue said, "Miss Maomao, maybe it's about time you let yourself get a little closer to Master Lakan. *You* would know it was all calculated, but you could be a little nicer."

"I think the moment either of us got any closer than we already are, he'd never leave me alone, and then neither of us would get any work done. Is that what you want?"

"Oh! Yes. Your point is taken." Chue clapped her hands, but it looked like an act. Maomao could only give the lighthearted lady-in-waiting a scowl nearly as grim as the one she'd fixed on the strategist.

Chapter 5: A Brother's Return

It had been ten days since the first wave of the insect plague when a dark shadow appeared in the sky again.

So they're back.

Maomao had just returned from checking on the girl on whom she'd performed surgery. The child was stable, but this new swarm couldn't have come at a worse time for her. Maomao hurried back to the annex and locked the medical office.

The people at the estate had already received word via messenger that what appeared to be a grasshopper swarm had been spotted. They were more ready than they had been the last time.

"Heek! Bugs again," moaned the quack doctor, who was curled up in a corner. Maomao tossed a jacket at him.

"Master Physician, those bugs won't wait for us. You need to get ready."

"Wh-What will we do?"

"For starters, you should put on thick clothing that will survive some gnawing. Then lock every window you can lock. After that, I want you to plug any gaps in our building with mud or clay to keep the grasshoppers from getting in that way." Maomao pointed outside. There was no time. This was so urgent that they would need even the quack doctor to be on the alert.

"Mud? Are you sure we should be getting this nice house dirty? I have plenty of oil paper. We can use that!"

"Don't waste it. The place is going to get dirty when those bugs show up anyway. No point worrying about it."

The quack shuffled outside and started scooping dirt from the garden into a bucket. The duck appeared from who knew where and started squawking threats at the sky.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Lihaku, who had already wrapped a cloth around his face.

Maomao glanced in the back of the medical office. "I think we still have some seed potatoes left in the storage room. Spread some of these chemicals around the area to keep the bugs from getting at them." As there

was still no sign of Lahan's Brother, it fell to Maomao to keep the potatoes safe. She clenched her fist: she was damned if she was going to let the likes of some insects have them.

"Oooh! Your famous poison!"

"It's pesticide!" Maomao snapped. If she let the mistake go once, everyone would start making it, and then there would be no going back.

The second wave of insects was modest compared to the first. In just a few hours the grasshoppers had left again, and none had penetrated the carefully secured medical office or storeroom.

The people of the western capital were already on edge mentally and physically, however, and this new swarm was more than enough to rob them of any composure they might have regained after the last episode. With each day that went by, they found themselves further drained of what little wherewithal they had left.

Day 13:

Another case of arson. Someone was trying to steal food. The culprit was soon apprehended, but the merchant's entire store burned down.

Day 14:

Not enough doctors. Dr. You appropriated Tianyu and he hasn't come back. A very pleasant day indeed.

Day 15:

Food problems. People are hoarding provisions everywhere. Fights are breaking out among the commoners, and there are more and more attacks on rich people's houses.

Day 16:

Victims of the swarm have started arriving in the western capital from other areas. One of them was supposedly demanding to see the Imperial younger brother.

Day 18:

Summoned by a bureaucrat. Wonder what's going on.

"So you're alive." Maomao stared at the tramp. *Tramp* might not seem

like a very polite word, but it was the only way to describe what she was seeing.

"You're darn right I'm alive! What else would I be?!"

He had thick facial hair, the hair on his head was unkempt, and his clothing had been chewed in places. He no longer looked as he once had—but it was him. Lahan's Brother, come home from a far country.

When a man who looked like a refugee had started demanding that they call the Emperor's younger brother, nobody listened to him. So he'd tried dropping Maomao's name instead.

That was when the bureaucrat had summoned her and she'd wondered what was going on.

When she arrived, Chue and Lihaku in tow, she had been confronted with the battered, road-weary Lahan's Brother. He looked a bit roughed up, and they had put him in a cramped little room that stopped just short of a jail cell. It wasn't a very nice way to treat somebody, but so many had turned to violence recently that the officials were antsy. It was hard to blame them.

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“You look like death!” Chue exclaimed.

“Well, excuse me! It wasn’t exactly a *personal choice*!” Lahan’s Brother said.

“Fine, fine. Kindhearted Miss Chue will get you a change of clothes right away!”

“Thank you,” Maomao said. While Chue was getting the clothes, she hoped she could ask Lahan’s Brother about what was going on. “I’m glad you’re safe. Everyone was worried about you,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. Very worried,” Lihaku said politely. The reality was, no one had been that worried. Lahan’s Brother seemed weirdly hard to kill. But Maomao couldn’t say that to him. And she *definitely* wouldn’t tell him that he’d been the butt of more than one joke during his absence.

“Gods take this swarm! It came way earlier than I expected! I tried to warn you—I tried!”

As angry as Lahan’s Brother was, he failed to be intimidating. Maomao could just imagine his younger brother Lahan passing him off with a “Yes, yes” anytime Lahan’s Brother got upset.

“Yes. We got your report, and the Moon Prince said everything afterward went according to plan. ‘That’s a professional for you,’ I believe he said.”

“*Professional*, my— Ughhh! I thought for sure I was going to die! And then I almost *did* die! Maybe I’m dead right now...”

He must have been awfully tired, judging by the thousand-yard stare on his face.

“Don’t worry. I can assure you, you’re alive,” Maomao said, giving him a gentle pat to prove he was really there.

“And pretty thoroughly chewed up around the head region,” Lihaku said, running a comb through the man’s bedraggled hair. It wasn’t really a bodyguard’s place, but he must have felt bad for Lahan’s Brother. Unfortunately, Lihaku was a bit big and more than a little strong, and Lahan’s Brother looked agonized by his ministrations. At this rate, his head was going to be as barren as a grasshopper-ravaged field.

“Yow! Ow! Stop that!” Lahan’s Brother snapped. He usually came across as very much the eldest son that he was, but today there was something of the sullen child about him.

Maomao was brushing the dust off his clothes when she noticed something firm at his back. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Ah! I’m glad you asked.” Lahan’s Brother took off his overrobe,

which was little more than rags anyway, to reveal a bundle of actual rags strapped to his back. He opened the little bundle to reveal several bags.

Maomao looked inside one of them. “Wheat?”

“Looks like it,” Lihaku said.

Maomao and Lihaku looked at each other. It was perfectly ordinary, unremarkable grains of wheat.

“Yes, it’s wheat,” Lahan’s Brother confirmed.

“Okay, but... *Why* is it wheat?”

Yes, she knew how eager he had been to save the wheat from the grasshoppers, but to bring so much of it home, never letting it out of his sight? What was the reason?

“I’m glad you asked that too,” Lahan’s Brother said, and then he began to go back to the past. Clearly taking the first step on a long and winding road that would explain everything.

“Just the gist, please,” Maomao said before he could begin.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Sadly, she didn’t have time for Lahan’s Brother’s Saga of Wheat and Potatoes.

“Bah. Fine, have it your way. This was just before the swarm arrived...”

Lahan’s Brother told them about a certain village he’d been in, a place that grew a lot of wheat. The village headman, Lahan’s Brother said, had come to him for advice.

“He said that one particular family, you see, they always had bigger harvests than everyone else.”

“Oh?”

“He asked me to check this place out, see if they were doing anything different with their fields or how they raised the wheat. The people at the house always swore to the headman that they weren’t doing anything special and they had no secrets to tell him. He was hoping someone with connections to the capital region might be able to get them to cough something up.”

It turned out, however, that the people of this household *weren’t* doing anything special, nor did their field get much more sunlight than any other, or anything like that.

“You start each wheat crop with seeds from the previous harvest—and it turned out that this was special wheat.”

“Special how?” Maomao gave the wheat a close look, but it didn’t

seem unusual to her.

"Clothes are here!" Chue announced as she entered. Lahan's Brother flung off his ratty old cloak and started changing on the spot.

"Wow! That's some figure you have!" Chue interjected.

"Don't stare! I can't change with you staring at me!" Lahan's Brother said, shooing her away.

"She's right; you're built! You could be a soldier with muscles like those," Lihaku said.

"A soldier? You think so?" Lahan's Brother didn't seem displeased by the suggestion—it must have been very refreshing to him after being treated as a farmer for so long.

"I'm sorry, could we get back on subject?" Maomao said. She was sorry to be a wet blanket, but they didn't have time for this.

"Fine," Lahan's Brother muttered, though he didn't sound very happy about it. "When I compared their wheat to the rest of the village's crop, I found it was lower, closer to the ground. Presumably, as they used the same seeds over and over in their fields, the wheat started growing lower and lower and gradually there was more of it. If I hadn't happened to be there at harvest time, I would never have figured it out."

"What difference does being low make?" Maomao asked. Chue, meanwhile, was getting caught up by Lihaku, since she had missed the beginning of the conversation.

"Taller crops—not just wheat; this goes for rice too—are more prone to being buffeted by the wind, which can knock them over and break the stems. Then the plant rots, and that's it. Being closer to the ground, the stalks are more stable and better able to put out ears."

"Huh!" Maomao said. So by sheer coincidence, this family had stumbled across lower-growing wheat, then continued using it for years and years.

"There's one other thing—although this is just my guess," Lahan's Brother said. He was looking a bit more respectable in fresh clothing, and with a hair tie to secure his disheveled hair. "I think the grains seem stuck more firmly in the ear than with other wheat."

"Meaning what?"

"A big factor in the size and quality of a harvest is how many grains are left in the wheat ears. Imagine what happens if the grains fall out of the ears before the harvest. The farmers are so busy harvesting, they're not about to stop and pick them all up, right? If ten percent of the grains drop

before the harvest, that's ten percent of your harvest gone. If twenty percent, then twenty percent, and so on."

Maomao could see how that would have a significant and direct impact on the harvest.

"I brought these home because I thought that if we could cultivate lower, sturdier varieties of wheat, we might get larger harvests. And if we share the seeds we get from that harvest, then it doesn't have to be just one field—every field could produce a larger yield. Of course, we'd have to find out if the soil and conditions are right for it first."

"So that's why you hauled this here," Maomao said. Then she, Chue, and Lihaku all chorused, "Wow!" They were impressed.

This is a real farmer, here. One who thinks about the future, no less!

The other two were no doubt thinking much the same thing. So many farmers were bent on keeping their secrets, telling no one when they had a proven method of crop growing so as to keep their own profits high. After all, if food were plentiful everywhere, it would only get cheaper.

I guess this guy wouldn't make much of a businessman. He didn't look out for number one enough. Also, he was easily fooled. Some con man in the capital would fleece him in a minute flat.

Now that she thought about it, she remembered that it was also a letter from Lahan's Brother that had first warned them of the arrival of the swarm. She was beginning to think that maybe it was Lahan's Brother who had done the hardest work, and the most good, out of any of them since coming to I-sei Province.

We'll have to make sure we show him we appreciate all his effort. There wasn't much food to go around, but maybe today, Maomao thought, they could manage to find just a little bit more and make it something of a feast.

Most of all, she was glad to finally get some good news.

Chapter 6: From the Capital

Word that a major insect plague had broken out in the western capital had arrived ten days and four hours ago. As he listened to the panicked messenger's report, Lahan had pondered a miscalculation: the swarm had arrived at least two weeks earlier than he'd anticipated.

Now, in addition to his ordinary workload, he had to allocate support for I-sei Province as well. He would say that as a result, his work had increased by approximately forty-five percent.

"Those westerners need to get a hold of themselves," said Colleague No. 1, who resented the endless stream of work. This man was just six centimeters taller than average for his age bracket, but he'd been shot down by three successive court ladies on the grounds that he was "too uncouth." As the man smiled his slimy smile nearby, Lahan worked his mental abacus. He compared their countermeasures, their predicted numbers, to what they were seeing in reality; he had to figure out just how serious the miscalculation was and order more supplies to compensate. He figured there was a sixty percent chance that his superiors would tell him it was impossible.

Before Lahan was a letter ordering him to send emergency relief to the western capital. Easy for them to say—or, as the case may be, write. Those supplies didn't come out of nowhere. But he had been told to finagle some support, and finagle he would.

"Some bugs show up and they come running to us, begging for help? There's pathetic, and then there's pathetic."

Lahan tuned out Colleague No. 1's continued grumblings as he studied the stocks in the grain stores. The Moon Prince had bolstered the stockpiles by raising the annual tribute last year, and it made their own stores the logical place to start looking for provisions to send.

"Sir Lahan, may I punch that guy?" asked Colleague No. 2. Colleague No. 1 was not aware, perhaps, that No. 2 came from I-sei Province. He had black hair and eyes, like any other full-blooded man of Kaou, but his nose was some six millimeters higher than average, the lines on his face three millimeters deeper.

"I'd rather you not. Without you here, my work will increase by

another twenty percent."

Lahan was not the type to speak ill about people—at least people other than his honored father, perhaps. The walls had ears, as the saying went—but that didn't stop Colleague No. 1 from continuing to heap abuse on the western capital.

Lahan straightened his papers, then clapped No. 1 on the shoulder and smiled. "If that's the way you feel, I'll take all the paperwork relating to the insect swarm off your hands. In exchange, handle these for me."

"Say what?"

Colleague No. 1 looked at Lahan in disbelief. The job Lahan handed him was related to a particular, high-ranking bureaucrat No. 1 was looking to buddy up to. Specifically, he was the father of the next lady this colleague had in his sights. After being relentlessly teased at the last banquet about his three consecutive romantic failures, he was getting desperate.

"Yeah, okay, fine. But you owe me one," Colleague No. 1 said.

Lahan kept his peace; he only continued smiling. *Owe him*, indeed. As a matter of fact, he'd corrected Colleague No. 1's slipshod paperwork on forty-nine separate occasions in the past. In his mind, the ledger now read forty-eight.

Colleague No. 1 went out looking very pleased, although Lahan wasn't sure why. The particular official in question was notorious for churning through staff. Lahan had never known one of his adjuncts to last longer than three months before the man drove him out—and he was sure No. 1 didn't have it in him to hold out even that long. Lahan would be surprised if he hadn't quit in six days. Why six? Because every sixth day was Colleague No. 1's day off.

Lahan himself had been driven out by that particular official, but the man's face hadn't shifted by any values that indicated he was truly angry. He had shouted and yelled, yes, but his voice had been steady, without the tremors that indicated unchecked emotion. Above all, Lahan was more than confident that there had been no flaws in his work. The man was perfectly welcome to be upset, but Lahan knew the official himself was the cause of his own problems, so he had spent three easy months not particularly worrying about it. Now the man was a useful connection who could give him tickets to the plays at two silver per ticket.

"A-Are you sure about that? Letting him go? He may not be the greatest guy around, but he's our second-fastest worker after you, Lahan,"

said Colleague No. 3. He served directly under Lahan, although he was two years older than his bespectacled boss. He was trying to sound respectful, but Lahan was well aware that No. 3 had no love for Colleague No. 1.

"Fast he may be, but accurate is another matter. Speaking as the one who has to correct his careless calculations, I'm better off without him. Besides, I'm tired of babysitting someone whose work is directly impacted by his own personal motivation. We're only going to have more jobs dealing with the western capital from now on. If he decides he doesn't care and his efficiency decreases by thirty percent, it will drag everyone else's morale down with it."

Lahan put some other papers in front of Colleague No. 2. "I'm sorry, but there's a job I need to do. Can you take care of calculating the supplies to be sent to the western capital? And it won't be only food on that boat, so give that some thought as well. I think these papers should cover everything."

"Sure thing." No. 2 started calculating immediately. He was twelve percent slower than Colleague No. 1, but he was thorough and made few mistakes. Moreover, knowing that he was helping his beloved homeland would increase his efficiency by thirty percent, Lahan suspected, not to mention make him more than willing to do overtime.

"All right." Lahan knew that the trouble with the insect swarm was not over. He expected a second and a third request for emergency supplies. They would have to balance the royal capital's reputation with its finances, not to mention the devastation occurring in the western capital. "An insect plague! It's trouble. Trouble for all of us..."

"You don't *sound* particularly troubled," one of his subordinates said, albeit apologetically.

"Oh, I am. I just have an unfortunate habit of finding something more interesting the more trouble it causes me."

"You're a twisted one, sir."

"Maybe so. Maybe so." Lahan laughed—but he was glad that he was of a persuasion to find this engaging. To be paralyzed at the crucial moment, when something must be done, was not beautiful. Was it such a bad thing, when confronted with a disorganized pile of numbers, not to despair, but to find meaning in building order out of the chaos?

Lahan picked up his collection of documents relating to the western capital's past. "Now, I think it's time I got to work."

Come evening, Colleague No. 2 was indeed doing overtime of his own volition. Lahan, however, went home. Without his honored father Lakan around, it was his job to see to the safety of the La household. To that end, he required plenty of rest. Getting fewer than seven hours of sleep per night decreased his reaction speed by ten percent.

Going home, however, did not mean he was free of worries.

"Master Lahan!"

Standing by the gate of the house were two of his honored younger sister's colleagues, a pair of young women.

Lahan adjusted his glasses just before they had the chance to slide off his nose and greeted the lovely young ladies with a smile. "Yao. En'en. Whatever seems to be the matter?"

Yao, age sixteen. From the top, her numbers were... Well, a gentleman never tells.

The other girl was En'en, age twenty. The same as Lahan's honored younger sister, Maomao. A warning was written on her face: if he tried anything funny with Yao, she would end him.

"Whatever is the matter, indeed! I asked you to inform us if you knew anything about what was going on in the western capital, but you sent no word at all!" Yao said.

"Yes, I did say I would tell you, didn't I?" That was *if* he knew anything, but as no subsequent reports had yet arrived, he didn't feel he had anything he could say. Certainly, he had no obligation to give every detail to a couple of court ladies from a completely separate department. The number one impropriety among bureaucrats at court was horning in on someone else's territory—but the number two impropriety was leaking information because of a woman. The mixing of public and private business was never beautiful, no matter whom you did it for.

Nonetheless, the fact remained that Lahan was standing outside his house being yelled at by two young women. It wouldn't look good, whatever the circumstances. Lahan gave at least the outward impression of being pure and decent with women. No scandalous talk on the matter touched him, nor for that matter his father, notwithstanding the time the old man had bought out a courtesan a few years earlier.

If anything, Lahan wasn't so much worried for himself—he was afraid unseemly rumors would start about Yao or En'en.

"You must pardon me, but perhaps we could talk inside?" he said.

“Young mistress,” En’en said urgingly to Yao.

Finally Yao said, “All right.”

“Excellent.”

Lahan led them through the mansion toward the annex. On the way, he spotted the three children his father had picked up. One stopped working and bowed to him, then the others followed suit.

“Perfect timing. Si, Wu, Liu. Get tea implements and hot water from the kitchen and bring them to the annex, won’t you? Count to ten while you’re dispensing the hot water. Use the cart to bring it over—we can’t have you burning yourselves.”

“Yes, sir,” said Si, whose name meant “Four,” as the others meant “Five” and “Six,” respectively. The other two just nodded vacantly. Lahan’s honored father couldn’t remember names particularly well, so he called the children by successive numbers. Mostly Lahan used their actual names, but these three had come from an environment where the numbers were preferable to their real names.

Si’s predecessors Yi and Er—“One” and “Two”—had become soldiers, while San—“Three”—proved adept with sums and had stayed on at the house as help. Lahan had San purchasing trade goods and keeping an eye on the markets, and expected that in due course the child would become his right hand. It was thanks to San that things were running smoothly even with Lakan away and Lahan busy with extra work because of the swarm.

Lahan showed his visitors to the annex. En’en asked if she could help with anything, but he politely declined and told them to sit and read a book for a few minutes.

His insistence on treating them as guests was born of a refusal to cede the initiative to them.

“Master Lahan, I brought the tea,” said Si.

“Thank you.”

She’d even remembered to include snacks. He took three of the baked treats and gave one to each of the children. Then he steeped the tea himself—the household employed a minimum of servants.

“That’s quite lovely,” Yao said earnestly when she tasted the drink. En’en, though, looked less satisfied. Lahan was always precise about the amount, time, and temperature when he made tea, but a professional like En’en seemed to be looking for something else.

“Let’s get right to the point,” Lahan said, setting down his cup. “To be

completely frank, I don't *have* any precise information I can share with you about the insect plague in the western capital."

"Really?" Yao asked.

"It's true. The scale of the devastation is easy enough to guess from the quantity of provisions they're requesting. This doesn't look like it's going to be a short-term thing—they'll need repeated infusions of support if there's not to be widespread famine."

If they did nothing, tens of thousands of people might starve to death, and if that precipitated civil unrest, many more than that might be killed or injured.

It couldn't have been easy for a young woman brought up in the cushy life of the capital to understand what famine meant. Even to Lahan it was a somewhat remote word. He had been in debt up to his neck, but he had never faced starvation.

Famine was not beautiful. A starving man or woman, no matter how handsome or lovely they might once have been, would waste away to a dry husk, muscles and fat withering, siphoned off by hunger. Lahan had no love for withered things; even the proudest spirit that had once resided in the most beautiful body could be reduced to a ghost driven mad with hunger.

Some claimed that there were those who, though poverty-stricken, were beautiful of heart—but such people were probably just insane. Lahan wanted the world to overflow with beautiful things, and especially wanted to be surrounded by them himself. He spared no effort in achieving this desire.

"All right, well, maybe you can tell me this: Is Maomao safe?" Yao asked.

"I haven't had word from Maomao," he replied.

No, no word at all. But his father (or rather, judging by the handwriting, his subordinate) had written him a letter describing the current situation in brief, and it made no mention of Maomao. Lahan took that to mean she was all right.

Anyway, if Maomao wrote anything to him, it was likely to be no more than instructions on things she wanted him to procure. He was more concerned that he hadn't received any letters from Rikuson. If communications had ceased after the swarm struck, he could understand, but the letters had stopped coming months before that.

"I seriously doubt she has time to be writing letters given how chaotic

it must be. And if she does, there must be more important people to write to than some tangential busybody like me." Lahan started counting the days since the swarm. "We're twenty days after a major catastrophe. Or, one might say, *only* twenty days. Even under normal circumstances, getting a letter between the western capital and here takes two solid weeks. It's not that strange if we haven't heard from her yet, is it?"

"Word of the swarm arrived more than ten days ago!"

"Yes, and I guarantee you a mere court lady doesn't have access to the same communications network as the Imperial family and the most important administrators. What, you think they're going to send a post-horse with this anonymous girl's message? Priorities, priorities."

Yao was silent at that. Lahan realized that maybe he'd been a bit harsh, but he didn't intend to change tack. He would be happy for these two to regard him as their friend's kindly older brother, but he wouldn't let it cause him to mix personal and public business.

En'en, at least, must understand that even if Lahan could have supplied them with information, there would be nothing much they could do with it. If it had been just her, he might have told her everything he knew. But unlike En'en, Yao was still maturing emotionally. He didn't want her to do something rash because he had foolishly given her too many details. It was for the best—the best for Yao—that he didn't tell her anything.

Yao clenched her fists. She understood what he was saying intellectually, but her heart was still catching up.

Lahan wasn't doing this merely to torment her. He was simply stating the truth—it merely had the unfortunate side effect of seeming like an attack. It still caused En'en to give him a *don't-bully-my-mistress* glare. Her right cheek had risen by three millimeters and had developed a slight twitch.

This, in Lahan's opinion, was what made young ladies such trouble to deal with. It was why he only spent his time with older women—for better or worse, they had been around long enough to know how to comport themselves.

By that metric, he and his younger sister Maomao should have gotten along very well, but every time they saw each other, his toes only seemed to end up ever more grievously injured. He'd recently ordered special shoes made with steel in the toes to protect himself. They seemed perfect for craftsmen who used heavy materials, or workers who carried heavy objects, and he was already considering whether they might make a viable

commercial product.

They were only going to lose more time if Yao continued to sit there stewing, so Lahan thought of something he knew she liked. “Perhaps you’d take some hasma home with you? Just a little souvenir. I got it from a friend, but there’s far too much for me to eat by myself. I could use the help. Look, it’s dark out. I’ll call you a carriage.” He let his tone become a bit more friendly as he delicately urged them to go home.

But Yao said, “Let us stay here. Please.”

As one, Lahan and En’en responded, “What?” They both looked thoroughly shocked.

“Y-Young mistress, what do you mean by that?” En’en asked.

“Exactly what I said. We’ve stayed here before, haven’t we?”

“Well, yes, but that was on the pretense of a nice, long vacation...” The right shoulder of Yao’s rational-minded servant lowered by six millimeters; she was concerned.

“I haven’t read all the medical books in this house yet. I’m not going home until I have,” Yao said.

“You could just borrow them and take a few with you!” En’en replied, now openly horrified.

Even Lahan was starting to feel tense. Why did Yao suddenly want to stay overnight at his house? Was she trying to get him back for not giving her any information? No, she didn’t sound like she was doing this maliciously. There would be more murkiness in her voice if she were.

“I let you stay here last time because there were special circumstances,” Lahan said. “Maomao helped sell the pretext too. But this time is different. Much as I wish to extend kindness to a couple of young ladies, I won’t allow myself to be merely a convenient tool.”

He tried to be a gentleman, yes, but he was not going to simply let himself be taken advantage of. He wasn’t trying to get something in exchange—but those who ravenously devoured whatever they could were decidedly not beautiful.

There was a pause, then Yao said, “You think I’m just a selfish child making silly demands.”

Lahan didn’t say anything, didn’t say yes or no, but the smile that crept across his face should have told them everything. Selfishness—with no hint of the sweet child—he had plenty of from his biological mother; and temper, his grandfather was enough for that.

“I can see you don’t think much of me, Master Lahan,” Yao said. “You

think women just get what they want from men by being coy and demanding."

"And don't they?" he replied without thinking.

"No, they don't. Believe it or not, I have something to bargain with."

"What would that be?" Lahan blinked exactly three times.

"You know my uncle, don't you?"

"Yes, I should say that I do. Vice Minister Lu, isn't it?"

Lahan had looked into Yao's and En'en's backgrounds the last time they had stayed at his house. He had learned about Yao's uncle, an important member of the Board of Rites. He knew that Vice Minister Lu had spent much of his life going from one department to another, and that he was a sharp man.

"I believe he's in the western capital at the moment, isn't he?" Lahan asked.

The Board of Rites was in charge of religious observances and diplomacy, and the Moon Prince would need someone with him in the western capital to help conduct religious ceremonies. No mid-level functionary would do; it had to be a high-ranking member of the board.

"Do you know *why* my uncle was obliged to go to the western capital?" Yao asked.

"In order to help the Moon Prince conduct any necessary observances there, I presume. Not to mention that it would be helpful, in a land as close to our borders as I-sei Province, to have someone knowledgeable about diplomacy along."

"Both those things are true. But what if I told you that he went for the same reason as Dr. You?"

"That would tell me nothing."

Lahan had no acquaintance with Dr. You, so he didn't know what connection he might share with Vice Minister Lu. The only thing he knew about the good doctor was that he was among those who had gone to the western capital.

"My uncle lived in the western capital once, when he was younger. He only returned here to assume the family headship when my father died," Yao said.

Lahan was careful not to let his expression shift. As a way of getting his attention, it wasn't bad, not bad at all. Yao wanted him to realize that her connection with her uncle allowed her to know something important that he didn't.

Lahan was Lakan's adopted son, and outwardly he was a member of no particular political faction. With an eye on the future, though, he could very much see himself becoming a backer of the Emperor's younger brother. If there was information to be had that would be of benefit to the Moon Prince, Lahan was very interested in acquiring it. But he would have to probe the matter a little more.

"I grant you have a blood relation with Vice Minister Lu, but so what? I can't imagine a man as important as the vice minister would simply let crucial matters of state slip to anyone, even his niece."

"Young mistress, I think it's time we gave this up," En'en said, distraught. Much as she adored her "young mistress," she could see that Lahan was right.

Yao, however, ignored her. She said only one word: "Coal."

"Coal?" Lahan repeated, trying to contextualize it, figure out exactly what significance the word held. "You mean, the rock that comes from the ground?" His eyes widened.

Yao grinned. En'en looked very confused. Apparently there were things even Yao's omnicapable lady-in-waiting didn't know.

"Yes, that's it. They can mine it in the western capital."

"They *can*, yes, I've heard that. But they don't, because at the moment they have no use...for it..." Lahan trailed off. Coal was a charcoalized stone that burned readily despite being a rock. It produced a great deal of ash, however, and considering the time and trouble involved in getting it out of the ground, firewood and charcoal had always been seen as better alternatives—supposedly.

"My uncle was investigating the western capital's coal. Yes, he is a capable man, but even the most brilliant minister might slip up in a moment of weakness. Say, for example, when his dead brother's daughter had been weeping her eyes out, and he had finally comforted her and gotten her to sleep. He might speak of such a thing, never knowing that she was listening."

Yao chuckled and looked at Lahan triumphantly.

"In other words, you were sleepy, your memories hazy. Such information would hardly be credible," Lahan replied.

That brought Yao up short.

En'en, meanwhile, raised her hand. "Master Lahan," she said. She drew in her chin by three centimeters, and the way she couldn't decide where to look betrayed her hesitation. Nonetheless, she said, "Master Lu went to the

western capital before the former emperor met his end, before the demise of the former emperor and the empress dowager, whom they called the empress regnant. Given what happened, then and after, wouldn't it make sense if Master Lu had gone to investigate something?"

Lahan opened his eyes twenty percent wider than usual. He'd assumed that even if En'en knew something, she would stay quiet about it. But it seemed that seeing Yao cowed by Lahan's attitude had been more than she could bear. En'en was a substantially more competent negotiator than Yao, but in the end, swayed by her love for her mistress, she couldn't help saying something.

"That's what you think Vice Minister Lu was up to?" Lahan asked.

The vice minister was forty years old. Granted, he had begun his court service under the former emperor, but a man as smart as he was would have known what to do when confronted with the choice between continuing to serve the reigning sovereign, a puppet of the empress regnant with scant life left to live, or to align himself with the heir apparent.

Like Lahan, he would have asked himself what he could do to help give the prince a freer hand at court. It didn't take any calculations to see what would happen when the new ruler took over power from an empress regnant who had conducted puppet politics for so long. Ministers gorged on power sometimes acted as if they had forgotten there was a court hierarchy at all.

The prince—the man who now sat on the throne as Emperor—was well aware of the dangers, and had taken measures to neutralize them. The reason Lahan could say this with confidence and not as a rumor was because his honored father Lakan had lent the sovereign-to-be his aid at the time.

Lakan hadn't hesitated to chase his own father and half-brother out in order to secure power. At the same time, he had seen to it that several hostile administrators received punitive postings to distant lands. To Lakan, even the Emperor no doubt looked like a game piece, a King.

Lahan had played his part in all this. At the time, though, he'd been so absorbed in solving the puzzle he'd been given, breaking the code, that he hadn't stopped to think what it all meant. Looking back on it now, he wished he had kept a diary or something; then he might have been able to go back and make a comparison.

"Hrm." He was torn. For once, he wasn't sure what to do.

He wasn't looking for one hundred percent confidence in the

information. If it seemed even remotely likely to be useful, then he ought to try to get it. Even if the odds were, say, less than eleven percent.

Whatever the veracity of the information might be, now that he had been given the hint, “coal,” he would need to investigate. But insofar as this information warranted investigating, to throw Yao and En’en out of his house now would be to owe them something later.

At the moment, all Yao wanted was to stay here. She wasn’t even asking him for all the details about the western capital.

Part of him thought, would it really be so bad to let her stay? Yet at the same time, he harbored an anxiety he couldn’t give a name to. It was just a feeling, something too faint yet to quantify in numbers.

And Lahan decided to ignore it.

“Very well. If this annex suits you, you may stay here. However, that’s all that I’m offering. I will not provide you with any information that might be in violation of my professional duties.”

“Y-You mean it? We can stay?” Yao asked, her face growing thirty percent more cheerful than usual. En’en, by contrast, was fifty-five percent relieved and forty percent uneasy—while the remaining five percent was devoted to glowering at Lahan.

Why would she give him such a scathing look? Lahan felt very much the innocent victim here.

Later, Lahan would learn the true meaning of En’en’s glare, and he would have further cause to regret allowing Yao to stay in his home—but he couldn’t know that now. Not at this stage.

Chapter 7: The Letters That Arrived

Day 20:
Bandits have appeared all over I-sei Province. The soldiers stationed in the farming villages seem to be quite busy.

Day 21:
Lahan's Brother is renovating one of the storage rooms. Apparently building something.

Day 25:
Supplies have arrived from the central region. Much sooner than expected. In addition to food, there's a bit of medicine included, but still not enough.

Day 27:
Some stores are beginning to open. However, stock is still minimal, and low-quality items are rampant.

Day 28:
Seeing an increase in patients complaining of bleeding from the gums. Suspect malnutrition from a lack of fruits and vegetables.

Day 32:
The cooks in the kitchen tried their hand at grasshopper dishes, but it didn't go well. We're grateful for the occasional side of duck egg—it's a rare and precious source of nutrients.

Day 37:
Lahan's Brother was playing with the duck in front of his storage room. The duck wanted to get in, and he was trying to keep it out. Strangely, despite the species difference, they seemed to be having a successful conversation.

"What are you doing playing with that duck?"

“Who’s playing?! Come here and help me catch Jofu! Please—come on!”

It was the first time Maomao had heard anyone but Basen use the animal’s name. Lahan’s Brother and Basen hadn’t talked much in the farming village, but maybe the duck had been a shared point of conversation for them.

Anyway, Maomao dutifully scooped the duck up from behind. The humans might be suffering from malnutrition, but the bird was fat and boasted lustrous feathers. If Jofu had dared to step out the mansion’s gate, she would have soon found herself on someone’s dinner table. Maomao had to restrain herself from wringing the animal’s neck by constantly reminding herself that ducks laid eggs.

“She certainly seems to want to get in the storage room. Is there something in there?” Maomao asked.

“Here. This is what I’ve been making,” Lahan’s Brother said. He opened the door. In a corner of the room, Maomao saw a black curtain; Lahan’s Brother pulled it back to reveal a pile of trays. They had water in them, and some kind of seed, which had sucked up the water and was sprouting.

“Bean sprouts?” she asked.

“Exactly. This estate has a pond—I thought it might be worth a shot. I’d prefer some nice, running water, but we all know how precious water is here.”

“What are these seeds? They don’t look like mung or soybeans.”

Mung beans, in addition to producing sprouts, could be used to make noodles and for medicinal purposes. Soybeans—well, the benefits need hardly be enumerated.

“Burr clover,” he replied. “It’s used as fodder for horses, but I heard that humans can consume the fresh buds, so I thought it would be worth growing. I brought the seeds back with my grain.”

“Oh, that’s what that was?” Maomao asked. She remembered now that Lahan’s Brother had had several bags strapped to his body. The wheat had been so striking that she’d forgotten about the others—but she saw now that Lahan’s Brother had hardly met a seed he didn’t want to try cultivating.

“Yes, that’s right. And Jofu is so perceptive that she’s been trying to eat them since before I planted them. Hey! You! Yes, you! Don’t Basen and Baryou share their food with you? Not enough? You want some more?

Just you try it, you little...”

Lahan’s Brother gave the duck a bop on the head. They could have been two lovers in a painted scroll—did the duck’s guardian, Basen, know what they were getting up to?

“I’m surprised. Not many people know Master Baryou personally.” Even Maomao had found him no more congenial than a stray cat when they had encountered each other.

“Ah, yes. Once when I was summoned after coming back to the western capital, he passed me a letter from behind his curtain with some words of appreciation. I think it was the kindest thing anyone has done for me since I got here.”

“I like to think I try to be decent to you, Lahan’s Brother.”

She’d just been busy lately, and hadn’t gotten around to doing anything specifically *nice*.

“That’s a crock. But in any case, yes, I gave Miss Chue a written reply, and received another letter after that, and since then we’ve had quite the correspondence.”

“A messenger sparrow?” Maomao could just see Chue flitting back and forth like her namesake, letters in hand.

“Well, sometimes Jofu takes them.”

“The *duck* carries your letters.” Maomao, deeply suspicious, looked at the bird in her arms. Jofu was giving her puppy dog eyes as if in hopes that she would soon put her down. Since Lahan’s Brother had closed and locked the storage room again, she decided she could let her go. She put the duck down and she waddled off.

Maomao said, “I can’t help thinking you seem to do your best work when no one is looking, Lahan’s Brother.”

“That’s a pretty backhanded compliment.”

“It *is* a compliment. But listen, more important things: How many more of these bean sprouts can you grow?” If the answer was a lot, it would help a little with the malnutrition situation.

“The seeds in the storage room represent my entire supply right now. But it’s not like they’re rare. We could go around the nearest villages asking if anyone has any burr clover. I’ve heard rainy season is the time for this plant, so people might have more than you’d expect just now.”

“You think you could try to get as many as you can? I want everyone at the food distributions getting bean sprouts in their soup.”

Of course, what went in the food that was handed out wasn’t

Maomao's decision. She intended to bring the matter to Jinshi.

"The seeds are only half the equation. What do we do about water?" Lahan's Brother asked. "Assuming, of course, that we get enough seeds to dry up the pond."

"I think we can worry about that later. Anyway, I wouldn't say no to some soybeans or mung beans either."

"Good point. Although even if we're lucky, I think it'll only amount to a patch on the problem."

Lahan's Brother seemed to have a number of different irons in the fire besides his bean sprouts. He was in the process of turning a corner of the annex's garden into a field, something for which Maomao liked to imagine he'd gotten permission. Meanwhile, Chue was building a goat shed. Maomao hoped Gyokuen wouldn't be *too* surprised when he got back to the western capital.

"By the way, Lahan's Little Sister..."

"I'm sorry, what did you call me?" Maomao looked like she was ready to spit in his face.

"Oh, spare me. I'm pretty sure I saw someone going to the medical office. Don't you need to check on them? Do you trust that old doctor all by himself?"

"Point taken. I *am* worried, so I'll be going." She gave Lahan's Brother a little wave and headed for the medical office.

"Well! Fancy seeing you here," she said when she arrived. Who should be waiting in the office but Tianyu?

"We're out of medicine," he said.

"Oh you are, are you?"

"Uh-huh."

He gave her an expectant look. What did he want from her? The lax, easygoing man had acquired a tan from the desert sun. Dr. You had clearly been putting him to work.

"What exactly are you out of?" Maomao asked, eyeing the medicine cabinet.

"Styptics, antiseptics, and salves. Also cold medicine, antipyretics, diarrhea cures, and any drugs to help a headache."

"Is there anything you *do* have?" Maomao scowled. It seemed like just yesterday they had resupplied.

"Not really. We've had a lot of cases of the runs in particular. Maybe there's a sketchy restaurant in town. And the headache cures... Well, let's

say I think our superior needs them these days."

They only had two "superiors," Dr. You and another physician. Somehow, Maomao suspected the man in question was the latter.

"Stomach medication might be better. Not that we have any of that," Maomao said. She meant it as a joke, but circumstances were getting less and less funny. "This is the last of our medicine."

"Well, make some more! Please?"

"We don't have ingredients!" Maomao and her companions were making as much medicine as they could; even Lihaku and Chue were being pressed into service.

"Use substitutes, then."

"We are. We're almost out of them."

"Seriously? Doesn't that impact the quality?"

"Well, we can't have everything, can we?"

Of course Maomao would have preferred to supply only the best medicine, but they didn't have what they didn't have.

"The medicinal herbs aren't as good around here as they are in the central region," she said.

Part of it was the climate. The region around the western capital had its own endemic plant life, including some with medicinal applications, but Maomao, who had spent her entire life in the central region, didn't really know how to use them. This area was a nexus of trade and communication with other countries, and supposedly there was nothing that couldn't be obtained in the western capital.

I just wish they would prioritize medicine in those supply shipments they send.

Maybe they figured that food had to come first and that medicine could wait. Or maybe the supplies just weren't reaching Maomao at the medical office.

"Huh," Tianyu grunted. "At this rate, I wonder if we'll ever get back to the royal capital."

"Who knows."

"You think Luomen will be okay?" said the quack doctor, who had appeared without Maomao quite noticing him.

Right. Pops...

Luomen was serving in the rear palace in lieu of the quack, so she thought—she hoped—that he would be fine. If anything, she thought the quack should be more concerned about himself.

They'd known that the expedition to the western capital would be a longer one, but as Tianyu said, at the moment there was truly no end in sight. Maomao thought that maybe Jinshi, at least, ought to go back to the Imperial seat, but he showed no sign of leaving.

He might have rejected the idea himself, knowing him.

Things in the western capital at that moment were, quite frankly, bad. Yes, they had known what was coming, and that made it ever so slightly better, but they were facing down a natural disaster.

Insect plagues have supposedly been known to destroy countries before. Maybe there had been smaller swarms in the past here, but one as big as this? It must have been decades since such a thing had happened. Maybe fifty years.

Jinshi had requested support from the central region, and his presence at least ensured that it was easier to get than it would have been otherwise. They might even send a little more than they would have otherwise, as long as he was there.

From where Maomao was standing, Jinshi and the Emperor didn't seem to be at odds.

Even if I still have some questions about the incident that got him sent here.

Presumably, there had simply been no one else to go.

"I suppose the *honored* Imperial younger brother is still in his *honored* room doing his *honored* work," Tianyu said with no small trace of sarcasm.

"There's nothing else for him to do!" the quack doctor piped up. "The Moon Prince can't leave the mansion—it's dangerous!"

"Yeah, I get that, but it's not a good look," Tianyu said.

"What do you mean?"

"Soldiers are being sent hither and yon, while he just gives the orders, wolfing down his food in his nice, safe room—they say."

"Who says?"

"One of the lower-ranking soldiers I overheard having his potato congee."

"Oh, my!" The quack put his hands to his mouth and frowned in distress.

"Then again..." Here Tianyu turned to the counterargument. "Another soldier asked him, 'So who do you think got you those potatoes?'"

"Huh!"

In short, there were soldiers who doubted Jinshi's motives, but there were others who understood the position he was in. Still, if there were soldiers—even if it wasn't all of them—who had doubts about Jinshi, what must it be like among the common people?

Tianyu supplied the answer. "The governor around here sure knows how to make himself popular," he said. Technically, he was referring to the acting governor—Gyoku-ou.

"How to make himself popular?" the quack echoed. "You mean he helps with handing out the food himself?"

"He doesn't go that far, but the people like him. It's local soldiers who are passing out the grub, so people automatically assume it was their beloved governor who got it to them. And the soldiers don't make any secret when they go out to stop people from making trouble—within the capital limits, at least!"

"Well, now, that is something!" said the quack, who had begun to prepare tea. There were no more tea leaves, though, so he was brewing dried dandelion leaves.

"Something, sure. Even if it does all seem like a bit of a performance." Tianyu seemed to be deliberately talking Gyoku-ou up.

Actor talk again, huh? Maomao thought. The freak strategist had said something similar about the man.

"Pardon me, but if you don't mind my asking, how does Master Gyoku-ou look to the two of you?" Maomao asked. She really only needed Tianyu's opinion, but the quack looked so eager to be part of the conversation that she thought she should include him.

"Master Gyoku-ou is very impressive! So manly and decisive. I admit, I only got a quick glimpse of him, but still," the quack said. His opinion was about what Maomao had expected. She'd heard many people talk about Gyoku-ou, and while she hadn't had a chance to confirm it with her own eyes, at least on the surface he seemed to inspire this sort of impression.

"Good question..." Tianyu sipped his dandelion tea and packed the medicine Maomao gave him into a box. "He seems like...someone who was born in the wrong era."

"The wrong era?"

"Yeah. You know, a lot like your weirdo strategist."

Maomao did *not* like what she was hearing. "What exactly does that mean?"

“All I’m saying is they aren’t built to get along in daily life. Or...maybe I should say, they weren’t meant for quiet days. I got just a glimpse of the guy around town, and he seemed invigorated by all the fuss.”

“Funny, I might have said the same thing about you.”

“Maybe I’m one of them, then? Then again...maybe not quite.” Tianyu looked genuinely torn.

“What exactly makes you different?” Maomao asked.

“It’s like...the wanting to stand out. The wanting to be noticed. I can’t quite articulate it.”

“You mean a desire for approval?”

“Like I said, I’m not sure. Eh, whatever.” Tianyu drained the last of his tea, then left carrying his medicine. Tired of the subject of Gyoku-ou, probably.

“One of them, huh?” Maomao muttered. It didn’t sound like a very good thing to her.

Maybe she didn’t understand. Instead of worrying about it, she decided to see what she could do about shoring up their medicine supply.

After some consideration, Maomao decided that her best bet was to turn to a pro farmer. Having tended to his bean sprouts, he was now in his field.

“Grow medicinal herbs?” Lahan’s Brother had changed into work clothes and carried a hoe. His own costume—not to mention the expert way he swung the hoe—utterly betrayed all his insistence that he was not a farmer.

The groundskeeper’s meticulously manicured garden was now a thing of the past, transformed into an experimental agricultural space full of wheat and sweet potatoes. The earth was being worked by the other farmers who had accompanied Lahan’s Brother from the central region, as well as the groundskeeper himself, who looked thoroughly defeated.

“True, a field for medicinal herbs might be a good idea in the long run, but I think it’s going to be tough around here. The western capital itself is so dry it’s not really suited for fields, and the grasslands are too far away to be practical. And *this* field is off-limits! It’s for wheat and potatoes and nothing else!”

“But you’re always going off to plow fields all over, aren’t you, Lahan’s Brother?”

“That’s legitimate work! I was *told* to plant potato seeds everywhere I

could!”

“Who told you?” Had Jinshi made another special request of him?

“My father,” he said miserably. “I don’t think he has any idea what’s really going on. I got a letter from him, here in the middle of this emergency, and what did it say? ‘I’m waiting for your report!’ And meanwhile, I thought I was going to die!”

If Lahan’s Brother was a proper, serious farmer, Lahan’s Father was a deranged one.

“That’s true. You did well to survive, Lahan’s Brother. How *did* you get back here?” He seemed to have been separated from his bodyguards, and he’d been far on the western edge of the province; it must have been quite a journey.

“Urgh... I had my bodyguards part of the way, but one went chasing after the horses when they took fright at the grasshopper swarm and fled, another went his way when we were attacked by bandits... I managed to trade what little dried potato I had for what we needed at the various places we passed through—and then people tried to steal the rest of my potatoes! On my way westward through the villages, anywhere I stopped to teach them about growing potatoes, I also warned them that there could be a plague of insects coming, and on my way back I found that there was comparatively little damage to those villages. The first one, they even thanked me and gave me a place to stay. And then in the next village...”

This wouldn’t do. If Maomao listened to his entire story, she would have enough of his exploits to fill a book.

“Okay, yep, I get it, I hear you. Well, if you find a place that looks good for growing medicinal herbs, you tell me.”

“Oh, hear me out to the end. Come on, listen! Bah, fine. I can see there’s no reasoning with you. Just don’t expect too much.”

Lahan’s Brother might mutter and grumble, but he was a really good person; he would do his job. It was the same reason Maomao prayed that people wouldn’t work him into the ground.

“That reminds me—some letters came for you too,” he said.

“Oh? Who from?”

“Miss Chue was just here. Maybe you missed each other.”

“Right.”

The letters were presumably from Luomen, or maybe from the Verdigris House.

Maomao went back to the medical office and got her mail, then went to

her room to open it. She had gradually renovated the decor until, as one might expect, it was a simple room with medicinal herbs hanging everywhere. The quack doctor, who had so kindly redecorated for her in the first place, had looked disappointed, but on this point Maomao was not prepared to budge.

She had three letters, from Lahan, Yao, and En'en, respectively.

Oh, right. She remembered belatedly that before they'd set out, Yao had told her to write sometimes. *And I haven't sent a single word.*

Things had been so chaotic that she'd had neither the time nor the motivation to send any letters. She hadn't even given it much thought, assuming that if anything really serious came up, Jinshi would contact her at the medical office.

Maomao looked at the three letters and pondered how to approach them. After a moment, she decided to leave Lahan's for later. She waved her finger back and forth between Yao's and En'en's letters, not sure which to read first, and her finger settled on Yao's. It was backed with sturdy oil paper, to give it the best chance of surviving the long trip. Normally, Maomao might have expected En'en to add perfume, or use fine paper, or even send some flowers, but in this case they seemed to have prioritized utility.

It's far enough that you can't even assume the letter will ever arrive.

Yao's letter was the usual, pointed and pouty until it abruptly turned shy and sweet. It pointed out that Yao hadn't gotten any letters from Maomao, and wondered what was going on. It said she had heard about the insect plague in the west, and had taken it upon herself to write, and was Maomao doing okay? And so on and so forth.

The letter was written in careful columns of neat characters that occasionally grew bold with emotion. Ah, Yao. Even her handwriting was transparent.

Don't worry! I promise, I'll write back...

The real problem was how long it might take any letter Maomao sent to reach Yao, but that was out of her hands.

Next she opened En'en's letter. Like Yao's, it had been reinforced with oil paper.

She looked over the letter. Then she turned it over, looked up at the ceiling, and sighed. She pressed under her eyes with her thumb and pointer finger.

Then she turned the letter back over and looked again. The paper was

the same size as Yao's letter, but En'en's characters were hardly bigger than grains of rice, and ran together in a cursive hand, flowing down the page like a sutra. Some ninety percent of it was about Yao. This was no letter; it was a collection of field notes from En'en's observations of her mistress.

Maybe En'en was trying to tell Maomao something important, but the more of the letter Maomao read, the more the message seemed to be simply *My mistress is so darn cute!*

There was one thing that weighed on En'en: that Yao still hadn't given up the idea of doing the same work as a full-fledged physician.

There seemed to be something else too, but it was only an implication, a whiff detectable from her dense text, and nothing more.

Sorry, I don't have time to play guessing games, Maomao thought, and set En'en's letter aside. *All right, time for the last one.*

She was surprised to receive a letter from Lahan. Wouldn't it be better for him to contact Jinshi? Surely he realized that with Maomao, there was the distinct possibility that she would throw the letter away without ever reading it.

In any case, it had reached her safely, and for the sake of those who had helped it do so, she decided to open it.

Lahan's letter, too, was backed with oil paper, like the others. It hadn't surprised Maomao that Yao's and En'en's letters might be constructed the same way, but Lahan's as well? That seemed a little odd. Then again, maybe they sold paper that was made that way, specifically for sending long distances.

Whatever. She looked at the letter, which said:

Yao and En'en are at my house yet! What do you suppose I should do?

The sentences evinced a rare display of uncertainty on Lahan's part. The rest of the letter politely asked after the health of those in the western capital, but the matter of Yao and En'en was clearly his main concern.

Hell, I don't know.

Maomao carefully folded the letters back up. She needed somewhere to put them for the time being. The quack doctor had given her, at her request, an empty box from when he'd gotten some manju buns, and she decided to use that. Maomao was a commoner at heart, unable to throw away even an empty box.

Chapter 8: The Letters That Didn’t

Another massive pile of papers had accumulated in Rikuson’s office. It had been this way for days now, but they were necessary; there was nothing he could do about it. Instead, he worked his way through them, slowly and steadily, one thing at a time. There weren’t enough administrators, and all the work those extra personnel might have done landed on Rikuson.

It had been more than a month since the enormous plague of insects. The grasshoppers had attacked several more times, but after that things had calmed down. Well, not “things.” Just the grasshoppers. Having eaten their fill, the loathsome bugs were now trying to leave a new generation behind.

The problem was that people were fixated on the aftermath of the devastation. They were completely occupied with trying to make up for the damage to the harvest, but if they failed to take appropriate measures against the next swarm, the destruction would only get worse.

Rikuson could feel a headache coming on as he confronted all the damage reports and requests for emergency provisions. He wished he had the power to save all the people, but he was, ultimately, a mid-level functionary. There was only so much he could do.

He would have to assess the damage to each region and send support commensurate with the locality’s population. If he miscalculated, it might cause more looting or even result in further death from starvation.

Rikuson wanted to tear his hair out. When considering how much to distribute, he also had to check the records and requests against their stores of provisions. It wasn’t that he couldn’t do the math, but this was a heavy and wide-ranging responsibility that weighed on him.

“This would be a lot easier if Sir Lahan were here,” he muttered. A job like this would have been a walk in the park for him. He could have held an abacus in one hand and done most of the calculating in his head. He would have been able to look at the numbers purely *as* numbers and determine the fairest distribution.

Speaking of Lahan, it had been a long time since Rikuson had gotten any letters from him. The last one had come maybe two months before the swarm.

Rikuson had written to Lahan a couple of times after the event—he knew the other man was never averse to information of this variety. He would have expected a prompt reply. He realized that communications were not as reliable as they had been before the swarm, but could two separate letters fail to arrive? Or had someone discovered what was hidden in the letters he had been sending to Lahan and the Moon Prince?

Rikuson stopped an official who was just about to leave. “There haven’t been any letters addressed to me, have there?” he asked.

“No, Master Rikuson, I’m afraid not,” the official said flatly. This man was one Rikuson had seen much of ever since being sent to the western capital. He’d brought letters to the others a number of times, so if he said there was no mail for Rikuson, he probably meant it.

Was it only Rikuson who found that strange?

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Lahan being who he was, there was no way he didn't know about the plague of insects that had swept I-sei Province. Moreover, he was a man with his share of curiosity—he certainly should have written to Rikuson sometime in the last month to try to sound him out about what was going on. Were things really that busy in the capital?

Wait—had Lahan written to anyone else recently? A thought of the young woman Lahan referred to as his little sister flashed through Rikuson's mind. He considered asking her if she'd heard anything from him, but then thought better of it. It would be best if he kept his distance from Maomao. He knew she would keep her distance from him—that she would have to. That would be better for both of them. That was why Rikuson had made the joking offer of marriage: a joke it was, but he knew that the hyperprotective elements around Maomao would respond immediately.

He mentally put the matter aside and decided to submit the papers he had finished reviewing. He stepped into the hallway to flag down an official, but then he spotted Gyoku-ou on the far side of the courtyard garden with several soldiers.

Suddenly, Rikuson didn't want to be there. He retreated back to his desk and picked up one of the requests for provisions.

Addressed to the governor, it came from one of the farming villages. They hadn't been able to harvest anything, so would he please send some food, it asked. The petition also touched on the conscription of soldiers. That wasn't something Rikuson would normally see—this matter should have been taken care of before it reached him. The administrators must have mistakenly included it among the mass of paperwork.

The petition included such expressions of love and loyalty as the farmers knew how to muster. It thanked Gyoku-ou for having supported them out of his private finances several times in the past. In every way, the letter looked like an innocent cry for help from some innocent farmers turning to the best ruler they knew.

It sounded like a lovely story of a kind and generous governor rescuing his impoverished and hard-pressed people. How must Gyoku-ou look to them? It was only natural that they would be willing to furnish him with soldiers.

"Conscription," Rikuson mumbled. He thought about Gyoku-ou, with his soldiers. What did he intend to do with them? Yes, the people were restless after the major disaster that had just occurred, but did he really

need to raise more troops in order to suppress them?

Rikuson sighed. Gyoku-ou, popular with his people. An unprecedented disaster. The strategist and the Imperial younger brother, come from the royal capital.

The players were all here, the stage was set.

But set for what? Rikuson still wasn't sure. Because in his heart of hearts, he still cherished a wish, still held out hope.

Hope that Gyoku-ou would be a good governor after all.

Chapter 9: The Meeting

How many times had Jinshi heard that something was “for his own safety”? For more than a month now he had led a life that bordered on house arrest. He wasn’t to go anywhere outside of Gyoku-en’s annex. Occasionally he might be invited to the main house or the administrative office, but at such times he would be accompanied by a panoply of soldiers. Certainly enough to keep him from doing anything unscripted.

Even from the brief glimpses he got out of his carriage as he went from one building to another, he gained a sense of the destruction—but he knew that, in any other case, it would have been much worse.

Jinshi had come to the western capital in part on the assumption that this insect plague was going to occur. He’d looked into old records about past plagues. They described entire crops annihilated, people so desperately hungry that they resorted to cannibalism. It was no exaggeration when people said that a plague of insects could destroy an entire country.

Naturally, the dissatisfaction and anger were directed chiefly at the Imperial family, which stood atop the national hierarchy. That was why Jinshi continued to submit to his confinement.

At the moment, Gyoku-ou controlled what he could do. Nobody in Jinshi’s entourage liked it—some of them even regarded Gyoku-ou as a half-baked stage hero. But Jinshi had his position to think of. As the Emperor’s younger brother, he was supposedly here to survey things in the western capital. As such, he was, ultimately, a guest. If he did anything to contravene that role, it could come back to haunt him later.

Or at least, so he had believed.

“I think you’re letting them upstage you a bit *too* thoroughly, Moon Prince,” Chue said, although her face betrayed nothing. She sat across from him in the carriage, which was also occupied by a bodyguard and a second lady-in-waiting, although it was neither Suiren nor Taomei.

He’d chosen his most capable people in response to a very unexpected situation. In this case, Gaoshun accompanied him as his bodyguard—that would normally be Basen’s role, but Basen would not have meshed well with the person they were going to meet. Basen was angrier than anyone at

the way Jinshi had been treated in the western capital. He might be physically strong, but right now Jinshi needed someone who could keep their emotions in check.

"At this rate, people are going to think a helpless princeling bumbled in from the royal capital just to play a supporting part to Master Gyoku-ou." With a dexterous flick, several small pieces of jade appeared between Chue's fingers. Her hand worked busily: more emerged, then a few disappeared.

"I know," Jinshi said. That was precisely why he was on his way to the administrative office.

Yes, Jinshi was there as a guest, but he liked to think he had done all he could for the western capital. He'd offered them provisions that he had brought specifically for that purpose, and they had promptly been distributed. He'd sent messengers to nearby villages to help ascertain the extent of the damage, and then calculated how much food each location would need based on those assessments. He was glad he had brought a capable civil official like Baryou.

The reason help had been so quick in coming from the royal capital was because Jinshi had dispatched a post-horse the moment he'd heard from Lahan's Brother. If, at that point, nothing had happened—if there had been no swarm—it would have been easy to dismiss as a mistake on the part of the Imperial family.

The possibility of a swarm of insects had been a topic of conversation among the Emperor and some of his closest advisors and subordinates, and they had been aware of the possibility that it would strike in the western capital. But the decision to request support had fallen to Jinshi alone. He'd had no guarantees that the swarm would arrive—in which case, the supply ship might even have been refused permission to dock.

Therefore, and at the risk of sullying his own reputation, Jinshi had decided to allow Gyoku-ou to take control of events. When Gyoku-ou's messenger had come to him shortly after the swarm arrived, Jinshi reported that he was safe and asked if it would be acceptable for him to request support from the royal capital. He also conveyed to Gyoku-ou that he would like the governor to receive the supplies.

So it was that the provisions Jinshi had prepared and procured, Gyoku-ou distributed.

Those who had come with Jinshi from the capital and knew the truth were furious, but this was the western capital. Even if Jinshi had tried to

undertake the food handouts himself, he didn't have enough people to do it. He hadn't brought enough servants to cook and give out all that food. The quickest and best way to get it to the people who needed it was to work with Gyoku-ou.

The thing that most terrified people during a natural disaster was the uncertainty. Just being able to get a bowl of congee and a bit of rice would do much to relieve the anxiety.

Then there was the matter of market prices. Jinshi had received his share of exasperation for having no idea what things cost, but he'd been working on it the last few years and liked to think he was getting better. Even in the capital with all its wealth there were starving children who begged on the streets with empty rice bowls, or nightwalkers with their faces hidden who beckoned customers into dark corners, or parents who sold their own children to brothels. If he hadn't seen enough of it from his carriage as he passed by, he'd witnessed more than his fill by walking those streets himself.

Jinshi had worn fine silk all his life, had always had clear soup to drink every night and congee without any fillers. Even now, he was at no risk of starving, unlike everyone else in the western capital. Why? What was it all for?

He would do best to throw away foolish pride. If Gyoku-ou wanted to stand in the limelight, then let him. Better for Jinshi to let himself be used like a tool than to stubbornly, selfishly refuse to help. In fact, perhaps it was Jinshi who was doing the using.

Let the Emperor's younger brother be useless. Who cared if the people mocked him? Far better he be someone no one would desire to manipulate.

What would Basen think of all this? He'd be mad with rage, perhaps—but, unable to strike Jinshi in his anger, he would destroy anything else in the room that wasn't nailed down.

Jinshi, for his part, rather liked the name Jinshi. Even if it was an identity he'd concocted to fool the eunuchs and the ladies in the Emperor's "garden." He preferred Jinshi, a name people could say, to Ka Zuigetsu, which none could speak. Even if he knew that making himself approachable and easy to talk to was a pointless exercise.

Time passed as he ruminated, until he found himself at his destination, the administrative office.

"'Kay! We're here!" Chue looked outside and grinned.

Jinshi deliberately adjusted his mindset. Approachable he might be, but

they were not going to take him for a fool.

He was shown to a room with a round table. Gyoku-ou and Lakan were already seated. Lakan, apparently with time to kill, was working Go problems. In a corner of the room waited bureaucrats with papers of some kind.

Gaoshun and Chue traded a look: this didn't feel like the last time they had met Gyoku-ou, or the time before that. They were especially curious about Lakan. It wasn't always possible to predict how the fickle genius would behave—and that made it even harder to guess why he was at this table.

"My apologies for summoning you here," Gyoku-ou said, rising to his feet. Already, Jinshi knew it had been the right choice not to bring Basen. To have been sitting at all when a member of the Imperial family entered the room could be considered a sign of disrespect. On that note, Lakan showed no sign of looking up from his Go problems.

"What might I do for you?" Jinshi asked. "If this is about the insect swarm, I've brought some materials relating to the matter."

Gaoshun produced the papers. They concerned some preliminary calculations about the food handouts that Jinshi and his people had made. They also described research into hardy crops that were quick to go from planting to harvest, food that might help provide famine relief if the provisions proved insufficient. In this, Maomao's and Lahan's Brother's knowledge had proved invaluable. Finally, there were some reports about medicine and other things that would need to be supplied once the food situation was addressed.

"Yes, yes. You've been a great help to us in the face of this disaster, Moon Prince. I never imagined aid would come so rapidly from the central reaches."

Well, Jinshi had. Because he had requested the support several days before mentioning the matter to Gyoku-ou. He'd been banking on the fact that the request would spend at least that long in committee when it reached the royal capital.

"Are you in need of further supplies?" Jinshi asked. He'd reviewed the reports himself. The current stock of provisions was expected to hold out only two or three months at most—but there was a limit to how much support could be provided. The real solution was to get some crops growing as quickly as they could.

"I *do* wish to ask you for more support, if I might. In the form of personnel."

"Personnel? How do you mean?" True, Gyoku-ou was clearly short-staffed, but just sending in new folks willy-nilly wouldn't solve the problem. If he wanted more farmers, it would be better to teach the locals than bring in outsiders.

"I need soldiers," Gyoku-ou said.

"Why? You need help suppressing bandits?"

Food shortages tended to make the gulf between the haves and have-nots especially apparent. As the poor began to starve, they would soon turn to crime. The whole reason Jinshi had hurried to provide extra food was to blunt that possibility, to fill people's stomachs before they turned to violence.

Gyoku-ou gave Jinshi a smile that verged on a leer. It was an expression one would never have seen from his father. It was the look not of a merchant but of a soldier, of a man less interested in kindness and decency than martial valor.

A bureaucrat behind Gyoku-ou handed him a large piece of paper.

"I'd like you to take a look at this," Gyoku-ou said, and placed the paper on the table. It was a map of I-sei Province, with several areas circled in ink. Some of the circles were black and some were red, with more red circles the farther one went to the west.

"Hmm," Lakan said thoughtfully, looking up from his Go problems. "Bandit attacks?"

"Precisely."

They had circled everywhere an incident had taken place.

"Judging by the locations, I take it the red ones are incursions by foreign tribes."

"Your mind is every bit as sharp as they say, sir." Gyoku-ou looked at Lakan, visibly pleased. The strategist normally seemed like a doddering fool, but when it came to reading human behavior, he had no peer.

So the red circles were attacks believed to have been perpetrated by foreigners. True, I-sei Province was located right on the border—but even at that, the number of red circles seemed inordinately large to Jinshi. "Are they getting more frequent?" he asked.

"They are," Gyoku-ou confirmed. "There were a good number last year as well, but this year has been particularly bad. We'd made some, ahem, modest military preparations, but there couldn't have been a worse time

for an insect plague."

Jinshi had heard talk that conscriptions were increasing—but to hear such words from the governor's own mouth left him speechless. Gyoku-ou was no fool.

"I think we can safely assume that the swarm has driven those reprobates into Li," said Gyoku-ou. The swarm had covered a wide area, and the less prepared a place was, the worse the damage would be. Certainly other countries would have been hit at least as hard as their own, and possibly even worse.

"Then these soldiers you want are for the suppression of the tribes?" Jinshi asked.

There had been such an excursion some years before, but that had been merely about pushing the foreigners back—as he recalled, it hadn't gone to I-sei province, but the western edge of Shihoku Province.

Gyoku-ou, however, said, "No," and laid down another map. This one showed an even larger area, including Shaoh, Hokuaren, and Anan. "What would you say if we aimed *here*?"

He pointed squarely at Shaoh.

Jinshi looked at him. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's as you can see on this map. The western reaches of I-sei Province have been the hardest hit. With the swarm having savaged every country around us, importing food is going to be difficult. So, what, then? Do we try to transport provisions overland?"

It would likely be impossible to transport enough food—and if attacks from the tribes weren't enough, an invasion by a foreign country was also a real possibility. I-sei Province's hard-won food would be stolen.

"What's the quickest way to get provisions to this western area?" Gyoku-ou asked. "I believe it's not by land—but by sea."

And there sat Shaoh, a central hub of trade, well-connected to other places by both land and water. Yes, having free use of Shaoh's harbors would certainly make it much easier to ensure a stable supply of food. Shaoh, however, would exact a heavy fee for the use of its harbors. Not to mention the likelihood that many of them were already dedicated to shoring up Shaoh's own internal supply problems in the wake of the plague.

"You're suggesting we start a war for this?" Jinshi kept his voice as level as he could. He had been more than ready to cede center stage to Gyoku-ou, to let him be in charge—but this was beyond the pale. In order

to put food in his people's mouths, he was proposing thievery. It would make him no different from the bandits he despised.

"Oh? You're against the idea? I seem to recall it is you yourself, Moon Prince, who has the greatest grievance against Shaoh. The ripest reason to go to war."

Gyoku-ou oozed confidence. Jinshi knew what he was referring to—the Shaohnese shrine maiden. He'd allowed her to die last year, and it had left Shaoh with leverage over him. Jinshi suspected, however, that Gyoku-ou did not know that the shrine maiden was in fact alive, and secretly taking refuge in Li.

"It was another Shaohnese woman who killed the shrine maiden," Gyoku-ou said. "I grant she had been admitted to the rear palace as a consort, but surely Li can't be held accountable for everything a woman from a foreign country might do." Certainly, Li had come off the worst in the opinion of the wider world—and the Imperial family in particular had been embarrassed. "Shaoh used the murder of their shrine maiden to try to blackmail our country. More than reason enough to go to war, I would say. But you wouldn't, *Imperial younger brother*?"

Depending on the era, a "reason to go to war" could be nearly anything. After all, simply besmirching the ruling family could get an entire clan wiped out.

Now Gyoku-ou turned to the strategist. "What do you think, Sir Lakan?"

Lakan once again stopped working his Go problems and studied the map intently. He wore the same look with which he would appraise a board game. He reached out to his aide, who gave him a bag. There were Shogi pieces inside.

"I don't know about your reasons or excuses. All I know is how to win at Shogi," Lakan said, and then he started arranging the pieces on the map. The aide gave Jinshi an apologetic look.

There was no malice in Lakan—but neither was there virtue. So long as something didn't harm him or his family, he paid it no mind. If there was a chance to participate in an interesting game, however—that, he wouldn't miss.

Jinshi saw now why Gyoku-ou had included Lakan in this conference. To the strategist, war was just a combination of his favorite games: it was a Shogi match using human pieces, and a game of Go in which you captured real territory.

“If you would stand at our head, Moon Prince, I have no doubt the people of the west would rally behind you.” This, then, was what Gyoku-ou was really aiming at with Jinshi. “Don’t you think that the people wish to behold you not merely as a visitor, but as a leader?”

There was one thing that Gyoku-ou seemed to have misunderstood. He believed Jinshi was eager for people to see him in his true guise. He was trying to flatter Jinshi’s pride as part of the Imperial family.

“If you should step forth, I would support you wholeheartedly—I would be your right hand!” Gyoku-ou said, his gaze piercing. Jinshi found himself wondering if Gyoku-ou truly was related to Gyokuyou. She, too, could be strong-willed, but she was nothing like this.

Jinshi could see it in Gyoku-ou’s eyes: he wanted war. He was eager for it.

“I may summon soldiers, but people live here.”

“Yes, they do. Our western lands are home to many loyal hearts. They may be merely farmers, but if the need were to arise, a great many of them would lend you their strength. Imagine! You leading us and Sir Lakan formulating our strategy. And finally, though I grant our power be modest, the You clan would stand to aid you.”

“The You clan?”

Gyoku-en might have started life as a merchant, but he had influence all over I-sei Province. His current power might even surpass that of the Yi, who had been destroyed seventeen years before.

Jinshi narrowed his eyes. “Tell me. Does Sir Gyoku-en know about this plan?”

There was the slightest twitch of Gyoku-ou’s eyebrow. “My father has long spoken of what we might gain if we could extend our reach into Shaoh’s territory.”

“Ahh. So he doesn’t know. And yet the *whole* clan of You would stand by me?”

Jinshi, drawing on his experiences in that den of women, the rear palace, remained resolutely calm. Compared to the lies women told, men’s braggadocio was rough, their facades easy to poke holes in.

“A sea route,” he said. “Yes, the benefits would be great. It does make one wish for Shaoh’s harbors, doesn’t it? But it would come at too high a price. What of the other countries with which Shaoh shares a land border? They might cease to send trade goods. And then there’s the question of attacking a nation that has made itself studiously neutral, as Shaoh has.

Would we not be seen as barbarians who refused to respect the agreements? Sir Gyoku-en, I feel sure, would weigh all these things carefully in his calculations."

Gyoku-en, as we've said, was a merchant at heart, and he knew better than to fixate on the profit right in front of his eyes. He would be sure to ask what he would sacrifice to gain it. Even if his son had written to him seeking his advice on this matter, Jinshi was confident that Gyoku-en would have told him that it was too soon for such a move.

Jinshi thought he caught a flicker in Gyoku-ou's eyes at the mention of his father's name; he thought the other man was the slightest bit shaken.

Gyoku-ou adopted a discontented air. Jinshi, meanwhile, refused to let his expression soften. The Emperor's younger brother he might be, but he knew that even so, Gyoku-ou would view him as a young upstart, hardly half his own age. Perhaps he thought he could overwhelm Jinshi with sheer presence.

He could not.

“I’m here as a representative of the central region—but I am also His Majesty’s eyes, and it would not be fitting for the eyes to take it upon themselves to command.”

The words *His Majesty* sent a shiver through the bureaucrats waiting nearby. All of them hailed from the western capital—meaning that they were Gyoku-ou’s allies, and presumably viewed Jinshi as little more than an insouciant child. There was audible muttering when the child pushed back against their own master.

Gaoshun gave Jinshi the faintest of smiles. Perhaps he had a bit less heartburn now. Chue could spare them the raised thumb, though.

Gyoku-ou would not be put off so easily. “You say, then, that as the Emperor’s eyes, you cannot make decisions on your own?” Yes, definitely the right choice to leave Basen behind. He would have risen to this obvious provocation and only made things worse.

“I say this *because* I have decided. Have you determined that an attack upon Shaoh would do more good than harm? A merchant must be skilled at such calculations.”

Jinshi returned taunt for taunt. He knew he was very much on Gyoku-ou’s home ground here, and he had no desire to engage in a losing battle. He wished he had reinforcements at this moment. “If we attack Shaoh, I cannot imagine Hokuaren will stand quietly by.”

“That ragtag confederation of barbarians skulking in the north? What have we to fear from them?”

“Fair enough. You know, there’s an animal that can be hunted up in Hokuaren—the red deer. Its horns make an excellent energy tonic, one prepared every night for the Emperor and his ladies in the rear palace.” There was no small self-deprecation in Jinshi’s remark. He’d spent years pretending to be a eunuch. He knew how to let ridicule roll off his back. “Then there’s the tigers. They have very large ones up north—the bones are used in making wine.”

It was called, appropriately enough, tiger bone wine, and it was said to be highly nourishing.

Needless to say, Jinshi had become quite knowledgeable about medicines. “A physician with extensive experience of medicines taught me, so it was quite effective,” he said.

Strictly speaking, it hadn’t been a physician, but his point was made. Moreover, he wasn’t so sure whether the elixir had been effective or not. He’d left it to the chefs in the rear palace to serve the medicinal meals.

“Medicines and...alcohol...” Lakan muttered. “Say, Onsou. Once this war starts, will we still be able to get those things?”

“We may be able to, sir, but they’ll probably be much more expensive,” his aide replied. “Medicine tends to be scarce in times of war. It’s hard on doctors and apothecaries.”

“I see.” Lakan returned the Shogi pieces he’d been placing into the bag they came from and stood up.

Onsou was a highly capable aide-de-camp. He’d naturally understood what Jinshi was trying to communicate to Lakan.

“What seems to be the matter, Sir Lakan?” Gyoku-ou asked, puzzled.

“Sorry. I’m leaving,” Lakan said, and with that, he turned and went.

“Master Lakan, wait for me!” Onsou cried, chasing after him.

The westerners had hardly picked their jaws up off the floor when Jinshi stood as well. “It seems our strategist is in no mood for war. Perhaps I might also be on my way, then?”

Gyoku-ou said nothing. Jinshi decided to take that to mean that he could go.

“He didn’t look like he liked that very much,” Chue whispered.

Sadly for Gyoku-ou, if there was one realm in which Jinshi had far more experience than he did, it was what made Lakan tick.

Chapter 10: The Golden Ratio

"What to do?" Lahan's Brother was fretting, a large map spread before him on the table in the medical office.

"Yes, whatever to do?" The quack doctor was also fretting. Maomao needed him to do some work, so she placed a mortar and some herbs beside him.

"What *are* you doing here, Lahan's Brother?" she asked him. This was the medical office; it wasn't a place where nonmedical personnel should just settle in and start fretting. Then again, she could understand—of everywhere in the mansion, this was perhaps the least on edge.

"The old guy said I could," Lahan's Brother protested.

"Lahans is so tired, young lady. He needs somewhere to rest!" The quack seemed to be under the impression that Lahan's Brother's name was Lahans, but it seemed like too much trouble to correct him. Even Lahan's Brother himself didn't say anything. Had day after day of grueling fatigue drained him of all desire to argue? Or hadn't he noticed? Or had he even come to accept this state of affairs?

He's definitely worked harder than any of us.

His actions might have saved tens of thousands of lives from the insect plague, and he hardly seemed to realize it. Maybe when this was all over, she could ask Jinshi about giving him a reward of some kind.

"What are you looking at, anyway?" Maomao asked, peering at the map. Now that she got a good look at it, she realized it was covered in annotations, describing things like the climate and soil type of each region in considerable detail.

"I kept notes on this map when I went on my grasshopper slaying journey. I wanted to write down any unique qualities of the fields, since I had the chance, but in the end I barely got to half of them."

Oh, man! This guy is useful*!*

Unfortunately for him, his job in this case was to be used and used again, only to see others steal his best moments. Maomao vowed afresh that she would see him recognized for his contributions this time if never again.

"From the map, I take it that you're trying to decide where to grow

crops? Didn't you do that already?"

"This time it's more concrete. The powers that be want to know what crops can be grown where. We can't just go on sending food from the central region forever, can we? I'm trying to figure out what we can grow quickly, with an eye toward crops that can be stockpiled."

"What about your potatoes?"

"I can't give them anything that I don't know for certain will grow. The next several years will be an experiment."

Apparently he didn't intend to imitate his father.

"What about, you know, ordinary wheat? We could clear out the fields that didn't get harvested and replant right away."

"Oh, we're going to grow wheat. Only in the fields where it was initially planned, though. Planting wheat in the same field year after year reduces the harvest."

"Oops." Right. Maomao nodded.

"What's all this about fields and harvests?" the quack said. He was failing to follow the conversation, as usual, but anyway, he was there.

"Beans might be feasible, but the harvest for those is late. Might not be much we can do about that." Lahan's Brother seemed to have an almanac in his head. "The real problem is seeds."

"Seeds? You mean, like...regular seeds?"

"Yeah. When you have nothing to eat, you don't have the margin to leave seeds for next year either. And then you're finished, right? I used some of my supply on the bean sprouts. There's still some leeway on the burr clover, but when it comes to soy or mung beans, we can't have people pulling them up by the roots."

Fair point: if people pulled out the very things the beans grew from, there would be nothing left.

"So I'm trying to think of something we can harvest, and harvest fast, alongside fields that will let us grow wheat."

It was startling to realize that this man's thinking would revolutionize the local agriculture, and he wasn't intimidated by the scale of the project.

Lahan's Brother wasn't looking for Maomao and the quack's input so much as he seemed to be getting his thoughts in order by talking aloud to them. Sometimes when a person asked for "advice," they weren't actually looking for a solution.

"The thing is, I need to keep yield, population, and soil quality in mind all at the same time. I was never much for calculating..."

“If Lahan were here, he’d have it done in a second,” Maomao said.

“Don’t you mention tousle-glasses to me!” Lahan’s Brother snapped. His annoyance was understandable; unlike his adaptable, politically astute younger brother, he’d had to live with the short straw all his life.

“He is your younger brother, isn’t he?” Maomao asked.

“He’s *your* older brother, isn’t he?” Lahan’s Brother shot back.

Things seemed likely to devolve from here, so Maomao stayed quiet and pretended the whole episode hadn’t happened.

“Speaking of...*him*, there haven’t been any letters from him,” Lahan’s Brother said.

“Really? From Lahan, you mean? I got one just the other day.”

“Not me. I’ve only gotten letters from my father. Lahan loves writing letters—I was expecting to get more from him.”

If Lahan had bothered to write to Maomao, it seemed strange that he wouldn’t write to Lahan’s Brother. Incidentally, the quack seemed to be gradually realizing that Lahan’s Brother wasn’t “Lahans,” but Lahan’s older brother. He still didn’t ask his name.

Maomao paused thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Lahan’s Brother asked.

“Nothing,” she said. She was simply thinking about the letter she’d gotten a few days earlier. She’d dismissed it without much thought then, but now...

She stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hrm? Oh, sure.”

Maomao went up to her room, where she found a small vase of flowers. She’d stripped the place of anything too girlish, but the quack occasionally left little decorations like this.

“Here,” Maomao said, returning with the box in which she kept her letters.

“What’s this?”

“The letter I got from Lahan.”

“Huh. Doesn’t this paper look oddly...nice to you?”

“I initially assumed it was to help it survive a long journey.” Maomao stared at Lahan’s letter. The regular writing paper was reinforced with a backing of oil paper. Yao’s and En’en’s letters, which had come at the same time, had been constructed the same way.

“Hey, what’s this sentence mean?” Lahan’s Brother asked, giving the line *Yao and En’en are at my house yet! What do you suppose I should do*?

very close scrutiny.

"Oh, you know," Maomao said, giving him a brief rundown on Yao and En'en's situation.

Just imagine what Lahan's Brother's face looked like then! The corners of his eyes, wide and astonished, were raised in fury, his nostrils flared, and he bared his teeth like a beast. His hair stood on end so violently it seemed to stretch up to heaven.

"Yeek!" the quack cried, shrinking back.

Maomao was almost as surprised as he was. She hadn't even known Lahan's Brother was capable of looking so angry. If someone had carved his likeness in wood at that moment, it could have passed for a wrathful deity.

"That bastard... He chases me to a piddling field somewhere, while he lives in a mansion with an eligible young woman... *Two* eligible young women!"

With En'en around, Maomao was sure that there would be no trysts, assignations, or romantic rendezvous of any kind, but she didn't think trying to explain that to Lahan's Brother would help at the moment.

"He's always been like this! Always waltzing in to steal my thunder..."

The quack doctor was still cowering, so Maomao grabbed the duck as it went by. Lahan's Brother buried his face in its feathers.

Duck therapy...

After a few minutes, Lahan's Brother's face was back to normal. The duck, evidently unwilling to work for free, began badgering the quack for some food.

With Lahan's Brother finally calm, Maomao thought maybe they could get back on track. "Don't you think there's something odd about this writing?" she said.

"Oh? Huh. How so?"

He even sounded different now. For all the La blood in his veins, he was a surprisingly normal person, and relatively handsome to boot, but at that moment he looked supremely sullen. If duck therapy wasn't enough, a cat seemed the next best thing, but unfortunately the little calico furball was far, far away.

"'Again' I would have understood, but 'yet'? That doesn't make sense. Those two went home once already."

"What do you mean, they went home *once*? This is the second time they've been there?"

“Lahan’s Brother, please keep your distance when you’re making that face.”

“I told you not to say Lahan’s name in front of me!”

“Yeah, okay.”

Lahan’s Brother appeared to be manfully enraged by his younger brother’s relations with the fairer sex.

Suppose, just suppose, that Yao and En’en had once again sought shelter at Lahan’s house because of things with Yao’s uncle. Maomao could imagine that. But she was also sure that Lahan, of all people, would never write *yet* when he meant *again*.

There’s something going on here.

She studied Lahan’s letter. It was stuck firmly to the oil paper backing; there didn’t seem to be any way to separate them.

No, wait. It looks like somebody tried *to peel them apart.*

Each of the four corners of the oil paper looked like they had been peeled at, although the traces were faint.

Somebody pulled them apart and then pasted them back together.

She examined the other two letters. If something had been done to Lahan’s missive, it seemed more than likely that the other two had been treated the same way.

When she looked closely at the text, she could see the characters were a bit blurred. Probably a product of pasting the oil paper on after the letter had been written, with the glue seeping through to the front.

What had happened to the letters? If someone had given Yao and En’en some idea, some little thing to do to their messages, they might all somehow be connected.

Maybe I’m supposed to put it over an open flame?

No; they were on oil paper. It would burn if exposed to a flame. Maybe the whole reason the letters were backed with oil paper was to fool any would-be tamperers: it would force them to actually look at the letters, whereupon they would discover there was no sensitive information in them. But that was a bluff.

Maomao continued to stare at the letters. Lahan’s Brother joined her. The quack, not wanting to feel left out, assumed a thoughtful expression.

“Are you sure this came from Lahan?” Lahan’s Brother asked at length.

“What makes you say that? That’s his handwriting. I know it pains you, but try to accept reality.”

“That’s not what I mean! You know how obsessed he is with numbers,

right?"

"Yes."

Hoo boy, did she *ever* know.

"But doesn't this letter look ugly to you?" Lahan's Brother spread open his younger brother's letter.

"I wouldn't say it seems unusual."

"No, it is. When he writes a letter, it's always on paper that's five lines across by eight lines down."

"Never knew that."

Maybe it was what Lahan would have referred to as a beautiful ratio.

Unfortunately, Maomao didn't have that much interest in Lahan's letters. "Maybe he just didn't have enough paper."

"No, no. You don't understand *how* obsessed with numbers he is! Once I gave myself a quick haircut—I just needed it to be shorter, you know?—and in the middle of the night, he came in and cut it all while I was asleep. And if it was uneven by so much as the width of a fingernail, he kept cutting, until there was hardly any left! Can you imagine how I felt?! He was *five*!"

"Okay, so you don't have the world's best younger brother."

Or family, for that matter.

"*That's* who we're dealing with. If he gave up his perfectly ordered writing style, there's a reason." Lahan's Brother's gaze nearly bored a hole through the letter.

Maomao, meanwhile, turned to the other two letters. Yao's was longer than Lahan's, but substantially shorter than En'en's. Maomao had read more than enough of En'en's letter, in fact, which was not only sprawling but written in characters the size of grains of rice. Lahan's and Yao's characters were the perfect size—very easy to read.

On a whim, Maomao placed Lahan's letter over Yao's. They had the same number of rows. But Yao's letter had exactly three times as many columns. With their characters being about the same size, they could easily be overlapped. If Yao's letter was longer, well, she could get emotional sometimes.

"Look at this," Maomao said.

"Look at what?"

The Verdigris House got more than its share of students who were taking, or who had passed, the civil service exam. They always said that by far the hardest part of the exam was being cooped up in what amounted to

a cave for days on end, writing, writing, writing. They had to write in perfectly ordered, balanced characters just like the copybooks.

"The columns and rows," said Maomao. It wasn't just the size of the characters: the *number* of characters running down the page was also identical.

She matched up the edges of the two letters, then noted the word in Yao's that corresponded to the *yet* in Lahan's. Then she slid the letter further along, observing the next word that overlapped with *yet*.

Yao's letter was precisely three times longer than Lahan's. She moved Lahan's letter one more time and observed the final overlap.

"Find...the...coal."

"Coal?"

"Yes. It's a rock that burns. It can be used medicinally, but I've heard it can also do a lot of harm."

Maomao's father, Luomen, was well aware that any drug could also be a poison, and he strove to use medicines with as few harmful effects as possible. Therefore, Maomao didn't know much about coal.

"So why are we looking for this, uh, coal?"

"I'm not sure myself. But I think we should report it."

Maomao put the letters back in the box, hoping it was all just a strange coincidence.

Chapter 11: The Coal Mine

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!”

“What is it, Miss Chue?”

This kind of exchange had nearly become a routine for them. It was unusual, however, for Chue to show up after a day’s work, just before Maomao went to bed.

“What brings you here so late?” Maomao asked.

“Well! I have a little something to tell you about Mister Lahan’s coal code!”

Maomao had told Jinshi about Lahan’s letter—and if Chue was coming to her at this hour, it suggested something had come of the matter.

“The fact is, not many letters have come from Mister Lahan for the Moon Prince.”

“I kind of thought not.”

“We estimate that only half his letters have made it here. But even on a long, difficult journey like this one, doesn’t it seem weird that so many letters addressed personally to the Moon Prince should accidentally disappear?”

“Ahh...”

In other words, someone was deliberately disposing of Lahan’s communications. If he was trying to tell them something, it would explain why he’d sent Maomao these riddling letters. A backup plan in case he didn’t reach Jinshi, the message conveyed in a way that only Maomao and her companions were likely to notice.

“It was still pretty lucky we spotted it,” she said.

“It sure was! Without you and Lahan’s Brother putting your heads together, you’d never have figured it out. And imagine if you’d eaten Lahan’s letter before you noticed!”

“I’m not going to eat any letters,” Maomao said. Sometimes she didn’t understand Chue’s jokes.

“Maybe not, but Miss Chue’s goats sometimes do.”

“You’re still trying to raise those goats, huh?”

“Yes! Thanks to them, I can drink nice, fresh, funny-smelling milk anytime I want.”

“You don’t make it sound very appetizing. Every time I see goat meat at dinner, I think maybe your friends finally met the butcher.”

“The momma goat had a baby and gives milk now. The kid is a boy, so he can be the husband of the third goat. As for the daddy goat, he went on a very long trip to a faraway place. They come, they go—but there are always three of them. Daddy Goat will live forever in Miss Chue’s heart...and stomach.”

Which all seemed to work out to such: one of the goats had been eaten. Maybe that was the animal Tianyu had been practicing his dissection on.

“Now! Maybe let’s get back on subject.”

“Yes, please,” Maomao said. If she entertained all Chue’s digressions, it would be morning before long.

“About that coal—it seems I-sei Province did mine some, although only a little bit.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed! But that was almost twenty years ago. There are no records of any recent mining operations.”

Still, what an intriguing thought.

“Let me guess—there are no records left from twenty years ago?” Maomao asked. The suppression of the Yi had occurred seventeen years past, during which time much of the era’s paper trail had been burned.

“You’re exactly right! Our suspicion is that there was someone among the suppress-ees who was in charge of the coal mining.”

“Well, that doesn’t help us much, then. But there must have been some people who did the actual mining, right?”

“Yes, but you know, what happens to people after a major conflict like that, who can say? The mine never yielded that much, anyway, so it was abandoned...”

“But in that case—”

“...Or anyway, it would create some very enticing opportunities if people *believed* that was true,” said Chue. Now, this was a striking turn in the conversation.

Chue went on: “Miss Maomao, did you know that Master Gyoku-ou invited Master Jinshi and the old-fart strategist to have a little chat?”

“No. And I don’t want to know,” she said firmly.

“I gather that Master Gyoku-ou suggested starting a war against another country.”

“You don’t much care what I think, do you, Miss Chue?”

“Miss Chue believes information should be shared with the right people!”

This information, however, was decidedly not something Maomao wanted to hear. It was clear why Chue had come to Maomao’s room at night, though—if the quack doctor heard about this, he would have been very distraught.

“Now, which country do you suppose Master Gyoku-ou suggested fighting?”

“I can’t hear you,” Maomao said, pressing her hands to her ears.

Chue grinned and tickled her.

“Hey! No fair!” Maomao flopped helplessly onto the bed and Chue jumped on her, pinning her down. So much for plugging her ears. Chue whispered to her: “He’s not after Hokuaren. It’s Shaoh he’s after.”

I didn’t want to hear that!

No, she would have preferred not to know—but now that she knew, she had a question.

“Why Shaoh? I would have thought attacking them would do us more harm than good. Setting aside the fact that attacking other countries is completely stupid to begin with.”

“Good question. One benefit is that if we capture the nearest city, it comes with harbors. We’d have free use of the sea lanes, and that’s worth a lot. Importing crops would be much easier.”

True, perhaps; yet to Maomao, it didn’t sound like enough.

“Plus, considering what Shaoh did to us last year over the shrine maiden, we have a ready excuse. All the more so if the Moon Prince, whom they wronged more than anyone, were to lead us.”

It might *look* like a good excuse outwardly, but hadn’t there been a lot of behind-the-scenes dealing? If the former shrine maiden were willing to provide information, they might indeed gain some extremely useful intelligence on how to attack Shaoh—but did Gyoku-ou know that the shrine maiden was still alive? Surely not.

“One more thing. Everyone’s on edge right now, and it makes people prone to violence. If we can point that anger away from our leaders and toward another country, wouldn’t that be helpful? Think of all the people who lost their jobs because of the swarm. How many of them have become bandits? Just imagine what the old fart could do with ‘pieces’ like that to deploy in battle.”

It was hardly an uncommon reason to start a war. But Maomao was

nobody's fool. "I thought Shaoh was supposed to be a neutral country. If we invade, Miss Chue, won't other nations be mad at us?"

"I should think so. Hokuaren in particular would take it hard. You could argue that if we can seize the harbor in one fell swoop, we might manage things somehow, but we would still have a rough time of it. And it would cost a lot of money!" She sprang to her feet. "But what if, say, there was a mountain with a coal mine on the western edge of the province?"

"The western edge..."

On the border with Shaoh, in other words.

"Coal doesn't get used a lot in Li, but it's an important fuel resource in places without much timber," Chue said.

"That's what I've heard." She didn't know firsthand; she'd never used the stuff herself, but a fuel that could be used without needing to make charcoal would certainly have its uses. "They say it stinks when you burn it, though, so people don't like it as much as charcoal."

Luomen had used coal during his studies abroad. Burning it produced secondary products that were poisonous, but could also be medicinal. If it was too much trouble to mine the coal, however, there was no point. Yes, the former empress regnant had banned logging, but even so, charcoal remained a better and cheaper fuel than coal.

"Wow, really? What does it smell like?" Chue asked.

"I mean, I haven't smelled it myself, but I'm told it's acrid. They say if you smell it once, you'll always recognize it. I guess the only way to know for sure would be to burn some ourselves." Maomao stayed seated on the bed and watched Chue.

"Hoh! Well, suppose there was a great deal of coal that could be extracted from the Shaoh side. What if we could import *that* with our newly obtained sea route? What if Shaoh didn't even know there was coal there, or what it was worth? Although... To be fair, I doubt they *really* don't know what it's worth."

That would change the equation: whether or not there would be a profit. Whether or not to go to war.

"If there were some *other* way to use coal too, that would change things even more—but let's set that aside." Chue mimed putting an object to one side.

"Now I understand why Lahan told me to look for it..." Maomao was suddenly very tired.

Lahan had found out, somehow, that there was coal in I-sei Province.

He'd found and examined records and materials about the province, whatever was left in the central region—and he had discovered that officially, there had been no mining.

This is completely different from the overreporting of the crops.

If the visitors from the central region learned about this, it really would be trouble.

So have they been mining the coal without informing the government?

It would certainly explain how there were enough resources to provide for farmers in times of poor harvest. Moreover, it would be hard to believe that such a thing had been done exclusively on Gyoku-ou's personal initiative.

Maomao broke into a very unpleasant sweat, but Chue looked as cool as could be.

"Miss Chue," Maomao said.

"What is it, Miss Maomao?"

"Tell me... All of this is strictly within the realm of speculation, isn't it?"

Never act on an assumption was Maomao's motto. Now of all times seemed like a moment to heed her old man's advice.

"Yes, it is. But there's some very compelling evidence," Chue said, dashing Maomao's hopes. "Mining is a very dangerous activity, so we believe that initially they used lots of slaves. Weren't the surviving Windreaders enslaved?"

Maomao didn't say anything. Knowing Chue's information network, she might already have talked to some of the former miners. For that matter, she might well be aware that Gyoku-ou's mother was herself a former member of the Windreader tribe.

"If your kinfolk were in serious trouble, wouldn't helping them be an excellent justification for...well, almost anything? You'd be a do-gooder. On the side of right! It might even explain the destruction of the Yi clan seventeen years ago."

Maomao barely heard what Chue was saying. Her head was full of a single thought.

"Miss Chue."

"Uh-huh?"

"Does Master Jinshi believe that there's a benefit to be had here? Is he going to war?"

Chue just smiled and answered her with a question of her own. "Do

you think he could?”

Not on his own. It wouldn’t be possible.

Chue smiled again, and almost as if she could read Maomao’s mind, said, “It’s times of peace—and only peace—that make the Moon Prince the great man he is.”

Was that a compliment? Maomao wasn’t sure—but it did make her feel a little bit better.

Chapter 12: Mother versus Son

About the time Jinshi was finishing breakfast, a man like a wild boar—er, ahem, that is, Basen—appeared. Jinshi was hardly even bothered by the duck that perched alternately on Basen's head and shoulders. Sadly, he was used to it by now.

"What's going on? I could hear you coming all the way down the hall." Taomei was not pleased with her son. There was at least one *other* thing she might have chided him for, but sadly, she, too, had grown accustomed.

"Mother! I cannot stay silent with things as they are!" Basen exclaimed. The duck gave a sympathetic quack and flapped her wings.

"Who are you calling Mother? We're at work, here!" She gave Basen a smack, startling the duck, which flapped away and right out of the room. It might have seemed a bit harsh, but this was how things were done in Gaoshun's family. Jinshi was used to this too. Although he still found it draining.

“My goodness!” Suiren put her hands to her cheeks and laughed, while Chue was uncharacteristically silent, trying not to draw attention to herself. As usual, Baryou was secreted behind his curtain. Jinshi could hear paper shuffling back there, so he knew the man was getting ready to work.

Gaoshun, as it happened, was out at that moment. If he’d been there, he would have looked more pained than anyone by the behavior of his wife and son.

“You’re the royal bodyguard, Basen—you could stand to act like it!” Taomei said. “A master is shamed when his servants make fools of themselves.”

“But Lady Taomei!” Basen said, knowing better than to make the same mistake twice. (Chue suppressed a smile at the mode of address he chose.) “Tell me—can *you* stand by and watch this happen?! The officials from the royal capital know to hold their tongues, but the administrators from this city mock the Moon Prince and say the most awful things! ‘He’s a leader in name but not in action!’ they say. ‘He could stand to learn a thing or two from Gyoku-ou!’”

Taomei’s hand rose again, the back this time. Chue yelped and put her hands to her cheeks, smooshing them together. Even Baryou was evidently interested enough to peek out from the gap in his curtain, although he was ultimately just an observer.

“You will refer to the governor with respect! I don’t care how low a piece of humanity he is, he still outranks you. If you give the slightest cause to be upset with you, you’ll only sully the Moon Prince’s name!”

A low piece of humanity—Jinshi could tell Taomei was barely holding back her disgust herself.

For better or worse, Jinshi had become more than used to enduring such mockery during his time as a “eunuch,” so the alleged taunts barely moved him.

It would be counterproductive for mother and child to start fighting, so Jinshi stepped in. He could possibly have instructed Suiren to intercede as well, but she was looking directly at him—so it looked like he had to do it.

“Will you both please contain yourselves?” he said.

“But sir!” they said in unison, for once in harmony.

“Your point is that I’m not viewed favorably in the western capital. Well, I knew that. What exactly is the benefit in getting upset about it?”

“Moon Prince,” Basen said. “You’ve done so much for this city, and Gy...*Sir* Gyoku-ou is taking the credit. Shouldn’t you make your work

more visible?"

"Do you think that would gain me anything?"

Everyone in the room fell silent.

First, Jinshi looked at Suiren.

"We'd have to find you more bodyguards," she said.

Then he turned to Taomei.

"Shall I obtain Sir Gyoku-ou's permission? For form's sake," she said. Even for her, evidently, respect for Gyoku-ou stopped at "Sir" and didn't rise to the level of "Master."

"We could send a doctor with you in the name of visiting the sick and the injured." An uncommonly sober suggestion from Basen.

"I'd almost completely forgotten to worry about this recently, but how many people do we really have who can endure your countenance, Moon Prince?" Chue asked. "I think the shut-in life might actually be easier for you!" Everyone else groaned audibly.

"I would hate to have to clean up after you when brides and lovers have a change of heart after seeing you, Moon Prince. It does the most terrible things to my stomach," came Baryou's mutter from behind his curtain.

Once more, they were all silent. Quiet enough, in fact, that a commotion could be heard outside. Another day, another fight going on somewhere.

At length, Chue ventured, "How about this?" She took a belt out of Jinshi's chest of clothes and placed it in front of Basen.

"Ah, so that's what you have in mind," said Suiren, who seemed to surmise everything Chue was saying from this one article of clothing.

"What? What does she have in mind?" asked Basen, who certainly hadn't.

Chue grinned. "The Moon Prince doesn't have to go outside himself. As long as it *looks* like he's doing something, everything is fine."

Jinshi started to get Chue's drift. "Basen," he said.

"Yes, sir? What is it?"

"I grant you that belt. Put it on and go to work in my stead."

"Sir?" Basen said, staring at the belt in amazement.

Chapter 13: A Visit to the Ill

Day 49:

More medicine arrived, but it's not enough. We're also out of the dandelions that were filling in for tea leaves.

Day 50:

Tasked with disinfecting bandages. These things are tattered rags now; we can't use them. We'll have to collect any cloth people don't need.

Day 51:

Chue told me to keep tomorrow open.

Day 52:

An abandoned building near the city's main plaza has been turned into a simple clinic. They haven't started seeing patients yet, and there's already a line.

The clinic was a lively place: they said they would see those sick and injured on account of the swarm for free, plus it wasn't far from the food handouts.

"Are you here to help, Niangniang?" asked Dr. Li. He was one of the mid-ranking physicians and a dedicated if sometimes stubborn man. He had also picked up the wrong name for Maomao.

He, Dr. You, and Tianyu saw people at the clinic who had been hurt. This was Jinshi's doing.

"It's Maomao," said Maomao.

"Maomao?"

"Yes, sir. Maomao," she repeated, wanting to make sure he got it right. She would have to correct Dr. Liu the next time she saw him too. Thankfully she, unlike Lahan's Brother, wasn't interrupted by the intervention of some higher power.

I knew anything might happen when we came to the western capital, but look at this.

The dedicated doctor had been tanned dark by the sun, and days of

continual work had left his cheeks thin. He looked more gaunt than slim, and there was a certain feral quality now added to the air of the overachiever he'd always possessed.

"To answer your question, sir, yes, the Moon Prince ordered me here. Master Guen can't leave the Moon Prince's side, so I've come in his place."

See? Maomao could learn a name too. She'd remembered the quack doctor's.

Even if he is here as a body double for my old man.

This was one of the few places where she could use the quack's real name—in the clinic it was only her, her bodyguard Lihaku, Chue, Basen, and Dr. Li. She was just giving a quick hello; she felt bad putting the patients off.

Maomao also wanted to keep it short because Basen had already finished his introductions and was looking around the clinic like he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. There were two other guards posted just outside the room to keep him safe—and it was fair to say that even Basen might need bodyguards in this situation.

That would put a person on edge.

Basen wasn't dressed in his usual soldier's uniform, but in fancy-ish clothes, and he was wearing a belt Jinshi had given to him. It was a brilliant purple, using a dye derived from shells—not something a commoner would ever own. The perfect way of telling everyone how important he was.

In sum: Basen had appeared on Jinshi's behalf to pay a visit to the sick and injured.

That's nice and all, but I'm not sure about this, Maomao thought. Everyone was suited to certain tasks and not to others. Yet she knew Jinshi couldn't exactly show himself in public right now.

Dr. Li looked at Maomao. "Tianyu told us you took point on refilling our medicine supply."

"Oh, did he?" Maomao asked, mentally preparing herself to be upbraided for being unable to get them any real medicine.

"The medications you sent over were all right, I suppose. You're obviously working hard to find substitute ingredients."

That was praise, she thought, as far as it went. "Is there something I can help you with, sir?" she asked.

"If you want to do some work, we've got no end of it. Washing

bandages, boiling them, treating the parade of patients injured in countless arguments, scuffles, fistfights, and brawls. Then there are the cases of scurvy and beriberi we've started seeing from malnutrition."

"Understood, sir. Should I consider the treatment of injuries to be the first priority?" Maomao put down her belongings and washed her hands. Injuries, they could treat. About malnutrition they could do little or nothing.

"I'll get to washing those bandages!" Chue piped up.

"What should I do?" Lihaku asked.

"As a bodyguard, I'd like you to just have a seat and stay quiet. A calming influence is what we need more than anything," Dr. Li said.

"Yessir! I don't need to take up one of your seats, though," Lihaku said, standing near the door.

"Wh-What about me?" asked Basen, clearly discomforted by his unfamiliar status. He looked to Dr. Li, clearly hoping for someone to give him orders.

"Er, you, Master Basen?" Dr. Li, always the high-achieving type, didn't look sure what to say. He seemed worried that it would be rude to specifically tell Basen to do something.

Basen comes from one of the named clans too. Not to mention he was there as Jinshi's second-in-command. He wildly outranked Dr. Li.

"Perhaps you could have a seat over here and hand out medicine, Master Basen. I'll prepare the prescriptions, you just put them in bags and give them to the patients."

"All right."

They couldn't put him to random chores or physical labor, so that was a pretty good compromise.

"And try to say something comforting to them!" Chue chirped.

"L-Like what?"

"Oh, you know. 'I want the people of Li to be hale and healthy!' Something like that. A simple 'Feel better' wouldn't sound right coming from you, Master Basen." Even she saw fit to refer to her brother-in-law as "Master" at that moment.

"That's a good point. Emphasizing 'the people of Li' would be an excellent idea," Dr. Li said.

The way he said it got Maomao's attention. "Where's Dr. You?" she asked him.

"Dr. You is visiting patients who are unable to come to the clinic. He's

from these parts, so he knows the lay of the land."

"I see."

There was something less than friendly in Dr. Li's tone when he spoke of the other physician. Maomao couldn't help herself. She asked, "Has something happened with Dr. You? It seems like there's something on your mind."

Normally, it would have been a rude question, but at the moment Dr. Li seemed to be looking for someone to complain to. "Dr. You isn't a relative of Master Gyoku-ou's, even though they share the same name—but the average patient is apt to *think* he is. He's a superb physician, but he's never had a mind for politics. That's the problem."

Ahh. Maomao clapped her hands. In other words, people would think the doctor was related to the governor, and although he wouldn't mean to, Dr. You would implicitly affirm it by failing to deny it. And the more patients he saw, the more credit would go to his "relative" Gyoku-ou and not to Jinshi.

I wonder if they made a bad choice, bringing him along.

No—he'd been the right person for the job when they had started out. It was only the timing that was bad.

Thinking of the people they had brought along reminded her of someone else on the medical staff.

"Where's Tianyu?" she asked.

"Attending Dr. You today. On account of his superb surgical and sewing skills."

Maomao was well aware of Tianyu's accomplishments in this area. The way he had handled the surgery on Gyoku-ou's granddaughter was exemplary. Maomao had removed the girl's stitches and hadn't seen her since then.

Still, Tianyu was the youngest man on staff, and they seemed intent on taking full advantage of him.

"All right," Dr. Li said. "There are patients waiting for us. May I go ahead and open the clinic?"

Maomao and the others nodded.

Just as Dr. Li had warned them, they were inundated with patients. People were desperate to take advantage of the opportunity for free medical care. Even on-duty soldiers showed up, so the staff really had no chance to rest.

The bulk of the examinations were left to Dr. Li, while Maomao and her companions did whatever he told them. Depending on the condition a person was in, Maomao would treat their injuries or dispense the appropriate medicine.

Although Basen still looked distinctly uncomfortable, he managed to offer words of comfort and encouragement and successfully bag the medicine for the patients. Once he seemed to be getting the hang of it, Maomao handed him paper and scissors and asked him to cut paper for the medicine packets, if he would be so kind—and so he did; quite successfully too. He seemed to think it was better than sitting around empty-handed while everyone else was working so hard. The only problem was, Maomao didn't want the patients to see him doing scut work, so she put him somewhere he wouldn't be seen.

He can *work, when he needs to.*

In fact, Basen was doing just as well as any civil official. The problem for him was that, as Jinshi's right-hand man, people simply assumed he should be able to do three times as much work as anyone else, so he looked bad in every comparison. Poor guy. Given his military background and then his assignment as direct subordinate to the Emperor's younger brother, it just seemed like he should be able to do this kind of thing.

It didn't help that Gaoshun probably did do all this stuff effortlessly.

Chue had a funny way of working; she seemed to shuffle and fidget and move around far more than was necessary. The strange thing was, she nonetheless worked very quickly. She disinfected a whole pile of bandages in the morning, then with Maomao's help she set about concocting lunch out of whatever was available. Sometimes she would stop to do a magic trick to delight a young patient.

The one who really had time on his hands was Lihaku. As the bodyguard, his entire job involved standing at the doorway. Chue occasionally put the other two guards to work, but Lihaku simply stood the entire time.

"Man, I look like a bump on a log," he said. He laughed a little—but the truth was, he was serving an important purpose. Dr. Li, despite the weathered look he'd acquired, was substantially scrawnier than most of the westerners. And he'd mentioned how many rough-and-tumble types came by the clinic for a quick exam. Having a 189-centimeter man standing by the door, even if he was effectively a statue, was a useful deterrent. And if any visitor seemed like they were going to start something, Lihaku silently

went over near them, which was a big help.

It wasn't so awful if they went for Maomao or Dr. Li, but if someone tried to go after Basen, that would be a real problem. He was there as Jinshi's personal representative, so they couldn't have him flying off the handle—and besides, if anyone was going to come off worse in an encounter like that, it was going to be the patient. They almost certainly wouldn't beat Basen in a contest of strength; they'd be lucky to get off with just a broken bone or two. Worse, although Maomao didn't know exactly what the laws were in the western capital, laying hands on a member of the Imperial family—or even his representative—seemed like a beheadable offense.

In any event, things went on until Dr. You and Tianyu got back.

"We're back!" Dr. You called as if entering his own home. His tanned skin did indeed make him look like a local. Tianyu came behind him, looking a bit ragged.

The first to answer was Chue. "Welcome home, good sir! Will you do some exams? Or have a bite to eat? Or maybe do some exams?" She didn't seem to know the meaning of the word *tired*, and couched in her friendly greeting was a less than subtle message that Dr. You should keep working.

"I'd love something to eat—but I'm sure Dr. Li hasn't eaten yet either, has he?"

"What? We're not going to have any food?" Tianyu groaned. He *was* tired. In his right hand he carried some tools, while in the left was a cloth-wrapped package. He might be smart-mouthed and occasionally obnoxious, and Maomao might not always know what he was thinking, but apparently he couldn't get the better of Dr. You. Frankly, Maomao loved to see it.

"Let's break for a meal, then! You've got thirty minutes!" Chue said, clapping her hands. Who had made her the emcee?

"Great! What's the side dish?" Tianyu asked.

"Side dish! We should be so lucky. Miss Chue took everything there was and put it all into this meal: Miss Chue's Special Homemade Fried Rice! The secret to the flavor is the stash of dried mussels they keep around to go with their booze!"

With a *shwp!* she whipped out a ladle and a plate and struck a pose. Yes, the fried rice was basically made with leftovers, but what with the condiments, spices, and fried egg, it looked pretty appealing. Chue always claimed she preferred eating to cooking, but she could clearly handle

herself in the kitchen.

"For a drink, you have a choice of watered-down grape juice or goat's milk. The water is looking a little cloudy, so I wouldn't recommend it."

That was good advice—there were grasshoppers floating in the well. Chue had been straining them out as she did the washing.

Maybe we need to distribute drinking water too, Maomao thought. If people drank contaminated water, they would only get sick. Maybe that explained where all the diarrhea medicine had gone.

People need to at least filter the water, and ideally boil it.

In point of fact, washing and boiling the bandages was quite a luxury in the western capital, where water and fuel were both more precious than they were in the central region. The water, obviously—but as for fuel, charcoal and firewood were scarce; what there was plenty of was animal dung.

Coal, huh...

In the central region, people thought of coal as a substitute for firewood or charcoal at best; people here in I-sei Province would value the resource very differently.

It might be worth so much to them that they would actually dig it out of a mountain to use it.

Gold and silver had to be mined; there was no substitute for them. But no one—at least no one in the central region—would think to dig something out of the earth when there were trees all over that were exactly as good. The people of I-sei Province, though, wanted a fuel source that wouldn't run out, something they could use on a grander scale than livestock excrement.

There certainly were advantages...

But enough to go to war for it? There must be something better.

Maomao let out a groan—just as someone clapped her on the shoulder.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao! You seem to be lost in thought a lot these days! Your mind's waaay off somewhere!"

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue. Am I really that zoned out?"

"Yeah! Or, well, anyway, you seem to sigh a lot."

Maomao put a hand over her mouth.

"All right, come on, Miss Maomao. Let's have something to eat. And I think Dr. You has something to say to Basen."

"Huh. I'm sure that'll be fun."

"Oh, yes! It will be very interesting, no doubt."

Maomao sometimes thought she and Chue didn't mean the same thing when they said things like this.

When Maomao got to the table where the fried rice was laid out, she found a smiling Dr. You and a rather unhappy-looking Basen. Tianyu plainly wanted to hurry up and eat, but he couldn't touch the food before they did. Apparently, even he understood the basic rules of etiquette.

"Ha ha ha! So you're his substitute, Sir Basen?" Dr. You asked him.

"May I ask what exactly is so funny about that?" Basen replied. Things between them seemed tense. Maybe they should have brought the duck to keep the mood light.

Maomao elbowed Chue.

"Yes? What's the matter?"

"Do they know each other or something?" Maomao whispered.

"No, I think this is the first time they've met," Chue whispered back.

"So what kind of person is Dr. You?"

"Oooh! Miss Chue would also like to know!"

"Oh, don't do that. Just tell me. I promise I'll suggest a walk around town."

"Oh! That's a great idea!"

Chue tended to follow Maomao whenever she went out. She seemed to love gamboling around the city, so she was quick to take Maomao up on this plan—as Maomao had guessed.

"Dr. You is a real upbeat go-getter, very dedicated to his work. But he wears his heart on his sleeve. He makes quick friends with anybody, but I don't think he'll ever truly understand my husband if he lives to be a hundred. Because he's a man of the light!"

Even Maomao hadn't *really* seen Chue's husband, Basen's older brother. She feared she might go mad if she got too close to someone who raised her hackles like that.

"What do you mean, he wears his heart on his sleeve?" she asked.

"Just like Dr. Li said, he doesn't seem to have any interest in politics. He knows the climate and the lay of the land in the western capital, and is an excellent doctor—*and* he has no interest in politics. He was an excellent choice for this trip."

Was. Past tense. Because there had been a miscalculation.

"Who could have predicted a sudden grasshopper plague, *and* that the Moon Prince wouldn't care about his reputation, *and* that Master Gyokuen's oldest son would be extremely popular here?"

“So Dr. You...?”

“He’s a fine person who would certainly never betray the Moon Prince.”

Maomao found that reassuring, although she wasn’t entirely sure why. If she felt better, though, there was one person who didn’t seem convinced.

“What are you after, here?” asked Basen, who was managing to act calm, although his nostrils had flared noticeably.

“What am I after?” echoed Dr. You, looking genuinely befuddled.

“Yes. You’ve come here on the Moon Prince’s orders—but what about the Prince’s reputation in the western capital? It’s not just the food for the handouts. The Moon Prince’s generosity is the whole reason you have this clinic, isn’t it?”

“Yes, certainly. He’s a man of great discernment. Every time I look around, I’m reminded that the fact that the western capital is so quiet despite that terrible plague is thanks to the Moon Prince.”

“You almost sound as if this isn’t the first grasshopper plague you’ve experienced. Like you know what’s happening, and that’s why you’re so relaxed,” Basen said. It was exactly what Maomao had wanted to ask, and she energetically applauded him in her mind.

“No *as if* about it. I’ve seen plenty of swarms in my time.”

“You have, Dr. You? Plenty of them? But I thought there hadn’t been a swarm here in decades,” Maomao said.

“Oh, there has. Just nothing big enough to bother the royal capital about.”

That certainly was plausible. But Basen pressed the point. “You didn’t report them? Isn’t that negligence?”

“Negligence? Let me ask you something, Sir Basen. How many crops must be consumed by the bugs before it’s considered a plague?”

“Well... Enough to make people’s lives harder, I guess.”

“And how much is that? So long as each person has enough grain to feed themselves, where’s the problem? There are other things we can sell; so long as we make up the shortfall, there’s no issue. Suppose, then, that we planted twice as much as normal, but then there was a swarm of insects, and in the end we only harvested the same amount as in an ordinary year. What then?”

“Er... Well...” Basen didn’t know what to say.

Dr. You was an upper physician, and he had the wits to prove it. He spoke as if all this were hypothetical, but presumably it was something that

had actually happened in the past.

Increasing the size of the area to be planted, even if the harvest was ultimately unchanged, would demand much greater labor and expenditure. If, nonetheless, the same amount of taxes were exacted—now, that would make life harder.

"Li is a vast and wide country," Dr. You said. "But the very greatness of its size means that the royal eye does not see all the way to its western edge. If the harvest is known only as a series of numbers, then what use is reporting a swarm of insects? It would only be dismissed out of hand. In that case, I should think it would be self-evident that the only choice for I-sei Province would be to deal with the matter itself."

Dr. You wore his heart on his sleeve—so he didn't hold back from telling Basen what he thought.

This is Dr. You, and even he feels this way, Maomao thought. The low opinion of Jinshi in the western capital seemed to have a lot to do with the perception that the central region didn't do anything for I-sei Province.

"The Moon Prince, however, did act appropriately. It reminded me of the Yi clan."

"The Yi clan?" Maomao asked before she could stop herself.

"Yes. Do you know them?" asked Dr. You, unperturbed at Maomao's bursting into the conversation. Basen would have to absorb that before he could come back into the talk, so Maomao decided to take over.

"Say, maybe we should have this discussion over some food?" Dr. You said at last. "Come, now, let's eat."

"Food!" said Tianyu, ecstatic to finally be getting a meal. Evidently it was sheer lack of energy that explained his silence.

"Whenever there was a swarm of insects, the Yi clan would step to the front and give instructions," Dr. You said.

"If you'll forgive my asking, sir, weren't they rebels?"

"Rebels? Hrm. Well, anything they did, I trust they did for the sake of I-sei Province. I personally never knew any of them to be rebellious." Dr. You took a bite of fried rice with his spoon while he spoke.

"What exactly were the people of the Yi clan like?" Maomao asked, taking a bite herself. The rice gave the dish plenty of body and the egg gave it plenty of flavor, nuanced by the spices and mussels. She shot Chue a discreet, approving thumbs-up.

"They were beautiful, all of them. And if you got close to them, they had a wonderful smell."

“A wonderful smell?” Maomao repeated. Then she said, “I heard they were matriarchal.”

“Yes, exactly. The women ran the clan. It’s not so different from the founding story of Li itself, is it? With Wang Mu, the Mother Royal? It’s not so surprising if such a fine and powerful woman should have other accomplished women among her inner circle. The Yi clan were the descendants of those women.”

Maomao discovered she couldn’t bring herself to continue eating. Tianyu, altogether uninterested in the story, had no such difficulties.

“I’m impressed you knew about that element, that they were matriarchal. Most young people today are so woefully ignorant of the Yi clan.” Dr. You was openly appreciative of her.

“Miss Chue knows too!”

“And so do I,” added Basen. Those who served the Imperial family probably learned of these things as a matter of course. But the average citizen of the central region would see no reason to know anything about the rulers of a land far to the west. Especially rulers who had been annihilated long ago.

“It was probably *because* they were women that they defended the border so stubbornly. The Yi clan took no husbands, yet they always had the most beautiful children; they looked like they had come from some other country. Their female children the Yi clan raised to be rulers, and their male children they would send out on the road.”

It was the continual mixing of blood that produced the beautiful people, and which helped keep other countries in line.

“They got along particularly well with Shaoh, with its shrine maiden. But the former empress dowager, the one called the empress regnant, perhaps didn’t get along with her so well, even if they were both women.”

“I’ll refrain from commenting on the quarrels of women,” Maomao said. Nonetheless, she had learned something very surprising—something Jinshi had never mentioned to her. Maybe she was the only one there who hadn’t known.

“So where were you seventeen years ago, Dr. You?” Maomao asked.

“Already practicing medicine in the central regions, I’m afraid.”

“Oh?”

As Maomao and Dr. You talked, Basen finished his fried rice and set down his spoon with gusto. He must have absorbed the moment while he was eating, because he said, “I see what you’re saying, Dr. You. The

Moon Prince is now paying the bill for a central region that has done nothing. Fine, let's assume you're right about that. It doesn't change the fact that all of his successes now are being credited to Sir You Gyoku-ou, and I have to say I don't like that. And you bear part of the blame, doctor."

"Me? How?"

"People take you to be acting on behalf of Sir Gyoku-ou on account of your name."

"Really?" He looked to Tianyu for confirmation.

"Aw, Dr. Li said the same thing, remember? He said you should start every interaction by mentioning that you'd come from the central region. I think what he meant was you should communicate that you were there on the Moon Prince's orders." Tianyu didn't look very happy about having to explain all this. He had some rice stuck to his cheek.

"What a strange thing to say, 'I come from the central region.' I *don't*, I come from around here. A lot of the people we've seen even know me."

"Well, then just say you're here on the Imperial younger brother's orders or something."

"Hrm. Doesn't that make it sound like I'm claiming to be...close to the Imperial family? It's a bit embarrassing."

"Huh?" said two voices at once. What was this guy talking about? He'd gone to the big city and made his fortune, and now he was too shy to let his friends and acquaintances celebrate him for it?

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao. Can I think of him as being in the same category as Mister Quack?"

"I don't know; I don't think he quite fits into the 'adorable old guy' box. Put him somewhere else. Closer to the duck, maybe."

"Understood!"

Maomao thought she had a pretty good idea what this "category" was that Chue was picturing.

"Anyway," Dr. You was saying, "anyone from these parts ought to know the difference between the old Yous and the new ones."

"The old and the new...what?" Maomao asked, tilting her head.

"The You family of doctors is the older Yous. Gyokuen and his kin came later. Now he's got a whole big family, children and grandchildren of all kinds, but when Gyokuen and his wife first got here, it was just them and their only child, their oldest son. Although they did bring plenty of servants with them."

"I don't know. I think even a local would have to be at least forty years

old to be aware of the difference," Chue suggested. And among commoners, whose lives often barely extended into their fifties, there were not that many people older than forty to know the difference. Moreover, Gyokuen and his family were the face of the western capital now. To younger people, *You* would almost certainly mean Gyokuen or Gyoku-ou.

"Huh. So that's how it is," Tianyu muttered.

"I'm surprised. I thought for sure the family was way older than that," said Maomao.

"There was a time when people started coming here to do trade. I think they moved here around then. You could find out exactly when if you checked the family register," Dr. You replied.

"No, I don't think you could. The family register's been burned up," Chue said as she sipped some goat's milk.

"That's a shame."

"So anyway, you just make sure to tell your patients that it's by the Moon Prince's good graces you're treating them," said Chue, driving home the point in lieu of Basen.

"Do you suppose I have to?" the old-but-not-that-old guy said, looking abashed.

"You're not even afraid of some thugs, Dr. You, so how can you possibly be embarrassed about this?"

"Quiet, Tianyu," he snapped.

Apparently he was the kind who was embarrassed to make himself look too good, even if he had the ability. He'd probably only managed to make upper physician because he had Dr. Liu for a boss—someone who looked for good people and found them.

"Excuse me?" said someone who now looked fixedly at Maomao and the others. "If you're done eating, could you get out here and relieve me?" It was Dr. Li, looking reproachfully through a crack in the door.

Chapter 14: Tianyu

After some discussion of how to handle Dr. You's shy streak, it was determined that Jinshi should grant him some object he could wear or carry.

"As long as all I have to do is wear it!" said the good doctor, but he was effectively convinced. Maomao thought such a gift was likely to get him even more fawned over than just saying he was there because of the Moon Prince, but she wasn't sure he realized that.

They should just give him a sash or a jade ring to put on his belt or whatever and be done with it.

It had been decided that Dr. Li should get something as well, and he, for his part, was much honored. When, after work, they'd told him about it, he'd actually refused.

"S-Surely there is no reason for *me* to have anything!"

"Wait! I can't be the only one who gets something!" Dr. You exclaimed. Dr. Li looked at his boss uneasily.

"Is it just the two of them?" Tianyu piped up. "If Dr. Li doesn't want his, I'll take it. My name's Li too."

It was indeed; the fact that Dr. Li and Tianyu shared the same surname was no end of trouble. And Maomao certainly wasn't privy to Dr. Li's personal name. Not to mention Lihaku was there as well, meaning there were no fewer than three Li's right there in that room.

"You're not getting it!" Dr. Li snapped. It couldn't be easy, having such...distinctive personalities both above and below him.

"Well, it's getting late. I think we should be on our way home," said Chue, packing her belongings. The clinic was closed for the evening. Chue was highly capable at everything she did, and that seemed to extend to cleaning a room.

Then she asked, "Say, what's this package?" Maomao thought Tianyu had brought it back with him.

"Oh, that's just..." Tianyu tried to swipe the package from Chue, but it fell. The contents went rolling across the floor.

Everyone looked on in silence. They were lucky that Basen and the other guards had gone to the bathroom and weren't there for this.

“Say, young lady,” said Lihaku, giving Tianyu a grim look. “You think I should restrain this guy?” He looked like he meant it.

“No, let’s see if we can find out what’s going on here first,” Maomao said, taking another look at the scattered contents of the package. It was a human arm. Just an arm, a single human body part lying there on the floor. It didn’t get much weirder than that, but the people in the room at that moment included the doctors, Maomao, Lihaku, and Chue.

“Care to explain the arm?” Maomao asked.

“I mean, look at it. I don’t think it can be reattached, not with the way it was cut off,” Tianyu said, picking up the appendage and blithely showing them the state of the stump.

It was a mess, all right; it didn’t look likely to stick even if they tried to reattach it.

“The grasshoppers chewed through a rope that was securing a sign. The sign dropped down and the arm popped right off. The guy it used to belong to said he didn’t need it anymore, so I took it.”

“You...took it.”

The guy had probably been in the pits of despair at losing his arm; Maomao figured he’d thought Tianyu would take it to give it a proper burial. Not to do...whatever this was.

“Niangniang, I thought maybe you and I could dissect it tog—”

He was interrupted by Dr. Li, who plucked the arm away from him—then dropped a knuckle on his head.

Ooh! He’s strong.

“Yow! Ow! I was just trying to learn something!” Tianyu objected.

“That’s enough out of you! We’re going to bury this, and bury it properly! And don’t just leave that there! It stinks!”

“Aww...” Tianyu glowered at Dr. Li’s back.

Dr. Li’s gotten stronger, Maomao thought. People sometimes underwent transformations when they were pushed beyond their limits. Dr. Li had seemed like he might be too fragile for this assignment, but he had transformed into good material indeed. Then again, maybe Dr. Liu had seen it in him all along—that would be impressive.

Tianyu, meanwhile, could be a little bit frightening—just look at what was happening—but if there was one thing good Maomao could say about him, it was that nothing ever fazed him. Also, they absolutely could not give him Jinshi’s token.

Dr. Li dragged Tianyu out of the room to go bury the arm. The clinic

wouldn't see anyone as long as the two of them were away. If any patients saw two of the medical personnel burying an arm, who knew what rumors would start? They asked one of the guards to stand watch while they worked specifically so that no one would see them.

Dr. You turned to Lihaku and Chue with a smile. "Let's just pretend we didn't see that, shall we?"

"We shall! Far be it from Miss Chue to have loose lips!"

"I understand," Lihaku said.

The doctors' dissections were technically forbidden, and were supposed to be secret. At least these two would know how to play along.

Maomao studied Dr. You, who smiled so readily as he tried to keep things under wraps. "Hm? Something the matter, Niangniang?"

"It's not Niangniang, sir. It's Maomao."

"Really? All right, Maomao, then. Maomao. Right. I'll remember that. Anyway, is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine, sir. I was just thinking, you seem to be awfully nice to the younger doctors."

There was a hint of contempt in her words, but Dr. You seemed unruffled; he kept smiling. "Ah, you mean Tianyu. It was Dr. Liu and I who drew him into this world, so I feel some responsibility toward him. Tianyu's quick to gripe about nepotism, but he's benefited more than anyone else from his connections." He crossed his arms and nodded as if to affirm his own point.

"You and Dr. Liu got him into medicine? What connections do you mean?" Maomao asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you don't know?"

"As much as Tianyu likes to stick his nose into other people's business, he doesn't volunteer much about himself."

Then again, Maomao hadn't asked either.

"You want to know about Tianyu, then? Since you'll be working with him in the future?" Dr. You asked as he cleaned up his tools.

"Do you think that's all right?"

"If I know Tianyu, the only reason he hasn't volunteered the information is because nobody's asked him."

"Fair enough." Maomao couldn't criticize; much the same applied to her.

"He comes from a family of hunters. I remember going with Dr. Liu to get some bear gall once. We found a kid—maybe you could call him a

young man, just—dissecting the bear all by himself. Careful, precise, totally unbothered by any of it. He plucked out only and exactly the organs we needed. Even Dr. Liu was impressed. And that boy was Tianyu."

Dr. You continued to clean up as he spoke, so Maomao kept making medicine while she listened. "That's how you discovered his talent and put them on the path to becoming a physician?" she asked. "But that makes it sound like he got the job because of his skills, not his connections."

"It *was* his connections, in a way. I said to his father, the hunter—I said, 'Ever thought about sending your boy to be a doctor?' I was only joking, but he went pale and started to shake. If he knew what the doctors did in secret, maybe it didn't sound like such a joke to him. The way his fear manifested, though... It was strange."

Why would he be afraid of a doctor's work? Yes, it could be unsettling to the average person, but Maomao would have expected a hunter to understand.

"I asked him why he was so upset, but he wouldn't tell me. In fact, he practically chased us out."

"What did you think was going on?"

"For the moment, there was nothing for us to do but go home—but Tianyu came chasing after us. He begged us to make him our apprentice. He knew his father would oppose it, but he was ready to run away from home to do it. Of course you know, Maomao, that Dr. Liu isn't the kind to just let a little boy tag along and abandon his family."

That's true. She could practically picture it.

"Tianyu said to us that he was a descendant of Kada, that doctoring *must* be his vocation."

"Kada, sir?" Maomao couldn't help it; she stopped working and looked at Dr. You.

"That's right, but not the famous physician of legend. The Kada who was punished for cutting up the body of an imperial prince to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. You do the work of a doctor, Maomao. I'm sure you've heard the story."

"Yes, sir."

Long ago, there had been a doctor called Kada because of his superlative medical knowledge and skills. But the combination of skill and ambition can make a man curious, and Kada's curiosity got him severely punished.

If Kada had in fact been a real person, there was no reason his

descendants shouldn't still exist—but they might very well be invested in making sure that they didn't repeat the mistakes of their forebear.

"So Kada's descendants became hunters?" Maomao asked.

"It makes sense, doesn't it? Hunters have been connected to doctors' work in the gathering of medical materials since ancient times. It's perfectly plausible that Kada might have become involved with some hunter's daughter, and when a name is passed down, why shouldn't it be the more famous name?"

Maomao had to admit that made sense.

"So you made Tianyu a doctor because he was Kada's descendant?" she asked.

"No, not at all. Neither his talent nor his lineage was a reason to just make him a physician. If anything, the reason...was his eyes." Dr. You stopped and heaved a sigh. He was holding a small knife slick with human fat. He must've used it in the course of his work. "Dr. Liu said that if we left him to a hunter's life, in time he would come to carve up humans just as he did bears or deer."

Maomao was silent at that. She couldn't deny it. In fact, she was all but convinced that he absolutely would have done exactly that.

"By nature, the human animal follows its desires. By educating a person, we create what we call rationality. But even then, not everyone can overcome their appetites." Dr. You wiped the knife clean and put it in a basket. "Tianyu's appetite takes the form of curiosity, and he can't overcome it. It was Dr. Liu's considered opinion that when he tired of animals, he would turn to people. Who knows how many folks a hunter living alone in the woods could dismantle before anyone noticed?"

"You don't think that might still be a problem even as a doctor?" Maomao asked frankly.

"That's a matter of the path he's guided down. At least, that's what Dr. Liu said. Any ship will steer straight if you keep a firm hand on the rudder. Dr. Liu can be a harsh man, but he has a softer side."

"If you say so," Maomao replied, not quite believing it. She *did*, however, believe the story of Tianyu's origins. "Why are you telling me all this?" Officially, she was nothing more than help for the real doctors. There was no need for Dr. You to go out of his way to let her in on this story.

"Oh, no reason. Seeing the fruits of Luomen's teaching just put me in a talkative mood, I guess."

He knows Pops? Dr. You had been a physician for a long time; it wouldn't be surprising if he and Luomen knew each other. *I wonder... If I hadn't had my old man to raise me, would I have looked the same way to them?*

Much as she hated to admit it, she and Tianyu shared a similar temperament in some ways. If Luomen hadn't been there, running his apothecary shop in the pleasure district, and raised her himself, she had no idea how she might have turned out.

"They must be about done burying that arm," Dr. You observed. "Shall we go back?"

"All right," Maomao said, and got ready to leave. She knew Tianyu would soon return, probably shuffling in with his shoulders slumped, but she resolved not to show him any particular sympathy. If anything, she intended to kick his ass and tell him to get a move on.

The visit to the clinic had gone without a hitch—but there was still the trip home, and it would be a long one.

The problems started almost as soon as Maomao stepped out the clinic door.

"Miss!" Lihaku shouted, grabbing her and pulling her back. At the same moment, a ball of mud landed with a splat at her feet.

"You brought the bugs! It's your fault!" a child shouted. Maomao looked around, but she couldn't tell where they were.

"Miss Maomao," said Chue, who had come up behind her. "I saw who it was. I could still catch them. What do you want me to do?" She was asking Maomao because it was Maomao who had been targeted.

I'm sure glad it was me, she thought. Maybe the child had chosen her for a target because she looked like the slowest moving one. They were just lucky they hadn't picked Basen.

"It didn't even hit me," she said. "There's no need to haul them in, Miss Chue." She supplemented this with a look that said: *Absolutely do not go after that child.*

"Understood!" That was easiest for Chue, as well. What good would it do them, chasing down and collaring a child here and now? Once they had caught them, they would have to punish them. All well and good if they could be let off with a gentle smack on the behind, but if there was a pretext—if, for example, they got violent with a lady-in-waiting serving the representative of the Emperor's younger brother—that modest

spanking could quickly become a hundred lashes. Maomao didn't want that, and Chue probably didn't either.

Although knowing her, she would do it if I asked.

Sometimes, though, discretion truly was the better part of valor. It might sound like she was being soft—but Maomao thought the world could use a bit more softness sometimes.

We brought the bugs, did we?

"Funny, considering the bugs came from the west," she muttered. It didn't make sense.

"Yes, and we came from the east," Chue added.

That wasn't really what the child had meant by *bring*. Those who believed in charms, curses, and other superstitions saw only a plague of insects that coincided with the arrival of people in the western capital who didn't belong there. Of course they would blame the swarm on the visitors.

Maomao would have loved to sit the kid down and explain the reality, but she doubted she would get through to them. She doubted they would even try to understand what she was saying.

Instead she ignored the mud ball entirely and turned toward the carriage. "Things are getting ugly here," she said.

Chapter 15: Violence

Maomao added more straw to the crackling fire in the oven.

Animal dung might actually be easier.

They were probably trying to be considerate by giving them straw and not dung to use for fuel, but the straw didn't clump together, which left it prone to drifting on the hot air. Charcoal and firewood were both expensive in the western capital, though, and were rarely sold.

Medicine boiled in the pot. She had to finish steeping it and then form it into pills, but she was so sleepy.

It's because I'm exhausted.

She didn't think she'd done much aside from her usual work, but one could see where that would make her tired. When you were really exhausted, you didn't notice that you were. You went past the height of fatigue, and then the moment you got a chance to relax, your body simply collapsed.

Not enough food, not enough medicine, not enough nutrition. Not enough of anything. They tried to substitute other things for what they didn't have, and when the substitutes ran out, they had to look for something to substitute for the substitutes.

Lahan's Brother's joy in the fields had turned to sorrow after the sweet potatoes were lost when it turned out they couldn't survive the night chill. He declared that they would plant regular potatoes after all. The sweet potato leaves had withered, but the stems could be eaten as vines, he said. As for the wheat, it was coming along as expected.

The bean sprouts were being added to the food handouts bit by bit. Wheat bran was supposed to be good for beriberi, so it was mixed into the bread—but people didn't like the resulting loaves.

The freak strategist would come by the annex periodically. Maomao was resolved to at least nod hello to him. According to Chue's information, it would be dangerous for all of them if he decided to take Gyoku-ou's side.

Upon investigation, it was discovered that coal was being used in a variety of locations even here in the western capital. (It was immediately obvious, Maomao was told, because of the unique smell.) It was used in

ironworks and to fire the kilns used to make pottery—both locations associated with Gyokuen.

There were too many things to think about.

Her head was so full, and she was so tired, that she was slow to notice the spark that drifted out and caught on the spare straw. *Is it just me, or is it a bit warm in here?* she thought, and it was only when she looked over that she saw the straw burning merrily. She put it out in a panic, and it didn't get any worse than that, but the quack doctor was deeply concerned about her, and Tianyu, who had shown up to get some medicine, had a great laugh at her expense.

I can't go on like this.

She forced herself to focus. It was when one was least attentive that the worst fires started.

And the fire in her stove wasn't the only thing burning at that moment.

The incident occurred on the seventy-fifth day.

Late that night, Maomao was awoken by shouting outside. She pulled on an overrobe and went to the window. She could see guards in the courtyard, and an unsettling collection of glinting flames.

Maomao opened her sleepy eyes and dressed quickly. At the bottom of the stairs she found Lihaku, already awake and standing at the ready. The quack doctor was there clutching his pillow and still in his pajamas, evidence that Lihaku must have dragged him out of bed.

"What's going on?" Maomao asked the soldier.

"I don't know exactly, but I've got a few ideas."

"Such as?"

"*Fweee*," the quack wheezed sleepily, but Maomao pretended not to hear him.

"A few days ago, there was a messenger from an outpost to the west. An incursion by the barbarian tribes. They attacked the food stores in the area."

"A food storehouse? But that would mean..." Even Maomao, oblivious to politics as she was, could see where this was going.

"Right. That storehouse contained the modest provisions the people there had been able to glean."

If this outpost was to the west, that would put it close to the border with Shaoh.

"The big shots have spent the last few days trying to decide what to

do," said Lihaku.

"That would explain why work has seemed so quiet recently." Jinshi hadn't even summoned Maomao for anything. So it had been the calm before the storm.

"Even if we wanted to help, our hands are full right now. Our good man Jinshi's been working his connections to get support from everywhere he can, but there's no point if it just gets stolen. The question is, what do we do about it? And the answers are getting ugly."

"Ugly."

"There's talk of starting a war."

Yeah, it figures.

It had been the way of humans—for that matter, of the whole animal kingdom—from the oldest times: when you ran out of food to eat, you attacked someone else.

"But Master Jinshi doesn't support that, does he?"

"No, he doesn't. And right now..."

Maomao could hear voices from outside. She couldn't make out much, but she thought she heard someone cry, "Give us the royal brother!"

"...people are starting to push back against the timid, sheltered princeling."

They'd known this could and probably would happen. Even Maomao had been aware. If anything, it had taken longer than they'd expected.

The question is, what do we do about it?

Then again, Maomao personally couldn't do much. She got a farm wagon ready and pulled a cloth over it. Then she took the drowsy quack by the hand.

"Oh, it's you, young lady," he said. "I just want to...sleep a little longer..."

She guided the quack, still half in dreamland, onto the cart. It was just as well that he was too sleepy to comprehend quite what was happening. If he'd been awake enough to tell what was going on, he would have been frantic.

"You can sleep, Master Physician," Maomao said. "Just do it here."

"Mm. Mm..." The quack, his limbs sticking off the cart, went back to sleep. Lihaku looked at him, openly mystified.

"It's so we can get away if we need to," Maomao explained. "If he had to run, I don't think the master physician could keep up with a foot-bound concubine from the rear palace."

“Huh. Fair enough. I could carry you under one arm and make tracks if I needed to, but I don’t think I could do that for the old guy. Good compromise.”

“I can’t believe they’re turning on the royal family,” Maomao said, packing a bag with bandages and wound-care medicine. Even Lihaku made himself useful, carrying a bottle of oil.

“Yeah. If this happened in the capital, the ringleaders would be executed and everyone who joined them would be beaten,” he said.

“I guess it just shows how high emotions are running.” The people had their collective hackles up.

“It’s a tough spot,” Lihaku said. “If it came down to kill or be killed...I have to admit, I’d start killing.” He had an unhappy smile on his face as he tore a piece of cloth and wrapped it around the end of a stick. They didn’t have any firewood to serve as torches, so he’d broken the leg off a chair. He was a soldier, trained in the ways of battle. He didn’t want to fight—but if he had to, he could.

Then he said, “With an outbreak of open violence like this, it’s the local rulers who are really going to be in trouble.”

“Yeah...”

Maomao, again, didn’t know much about politics. But she could tell that this was serious trouble.

Her heart was pounding in her ears, but having Lihaku there gave her a measure of reassurance, and meanwhile she had the responsibility of looking after the quack doctor.

“Master Gyoku-ou can say that the people rose up on their own, but he was the one who let things fester long enough for that to happen. A few commoners’ heads won’t be enough to pay for this affront to the royal family’s dignity.”

Maomao understood that. The lives of the Imperial family simply weighed that much heavier than those of the common people.

“Master Gyoku-ou was clearly cultivating his own popularity. I know our man Jinshi is a good guy, but I can’t believe he put up with it. And even if he’s willing to let it go, the people around him won’t be. Word must have reached the central region by now.”

If even the ordinarily relaxed Lihaku felt that way, the anger of those in the royal capital must be immense indeed.

“That’s a good point. I wonder how Empress Gyokuyou and Master Gyokuen feel about this.”

“Normally, you’d expect them to have a word to say about it.”

“Yes, you would...”

Considering their positions, neither of them could simply drop everything and come to the western capital. But might they send a letter or a messenger?

At the same time, there was another important figure here in addition to Jinshi and the freak strategist. Someone who would certainly not neglect communications with the capital.

“What was his name again? The other important guy who’s here?” Maomao asked. She’d heard it several times now, but as usual, she’d forgotten it.

“You aren’t much for remembering people’s names or faces, are you, miss? It was... Uh... Let’s see... I don’t remember. I remember he wasn’t, you know, a towering presence.”

“Sounds like you’re not much better than me, Master Lihaku.”

“Hold on! This guy, he was supposed to be in charge of rituals or something, right?”

“Rituals... So that would make him part of the Board of Rites... Oh! Lu! Vice Minister Lu, that was his name!” Maomao said, finally remembering.

“Right, right, Vice Minister Lu. Let’s just have faith that he’s doing something. Probably.”

“We can have all the faith we want. The trouble is happening now.”

“Point taken.”

They both sighed, and then there was a loud noise. Were the commoners trying to force their way into the annex?

“What just happened?” Maomao asked. If anyone had been hurt, she wanted to help them, but first she had to see to her own safety. Which, given her limited options, mostly meant lighting the torch and throwing it if anything happened.

I’m not eager to do that. But if it’s the only way to keep myself safe, I will.

They heard footsteps shuffling closer. Maomao and Lihaku both got ready to fight.

“Miss Maomaooo? Are you there?” It was Chue. “Do you need me to explain what’s going on?”

“Yes, please.”

Chue was holding a flag and sounded about as anxious as she usually did. “There’s a mob of commoners outside. Just like we predicted, their

anger finally exploded. They're shouting for the Moon Prince to come out to them, or be sent out to them. You know, that sort of thing."

"Yes, I can imagine. And hear them too."

"But you're thinking, wasn't there a big bang just now?"

"Yes, I am."

"That was Master Gyoku-ou's arrival."

Maomao grabbed her bag of medical equipment.

"Please, don't worry. Even Master Gyoku-ou wouldn't lay a hand on a member of the Imperial family. But I do think this is getting very interesting."

"Somehow, the things you think are interesting always just seem *bad* to me."

"Well, anyway, come and have a look."

At Chue's urging, Maomao started outside. Lihaku followed them.

"What about the master physician?" Maomao asked.

"Good question. I guess we should bring him," Chue said and started pushing the cart, although she didn't look very happy about it. She kept shooting pointed glances at Lihaku until he took over for her.

Once they were outside, Maomao could hear a resounding man's voice.

"Do you all understand?" he was saying. "Do you know how much the Moon Prince, who honorably resides in this household, has done for the people of the western capital?"

She heard the people murmuring.

"The grains in your food distributions were brought from afar by the Moon Prince. The fact that we are not now starving is by his munificence! The free clinic was likewise his doing. Those who have been there know all about it."

What's going on here?

If the voice had belonged to someone from Jinshi's inner circle, the words would have made sense, but as far as Maomao could surmise, that was Gyoku-ou speaking.

She picked up her pace. She would have to be closer if she wanted to see anything, but getting too close would be dangerous. She looked around for somewhere that might serve as a good vantage point.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao," Chue said, beckoning to her. She was already halfway up a nearby tree. Maomao climbed up after her.

"Please try not to fall!" Lihaku said. He was still pushing the quack doctor in his cart.

Up in the branches, Maomao and Chue had an excellent view of what was going on. They could see Jinshi, behind whom stood Basen. In front of him was Gyoku-ou, interposing himself between Jinshi and the masses. The people were keeping a respectful distance, almost like spectators at a play.

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“The Moon Prince responded with alacrity to the insect swarm. Much as I tried to provide for you as best I could, it is unquestionably thanks to him that you have suffered as little as you have. The immediate support from the central region is thanks to the Moon Prince’s presence here. Do you mean to tell me you cannot understand that?”

Maomao was thoroughly flummoxed. Gyoku-ou appeared to be completely reversing himself. He’d been more than happy to take credit for Jinshi’s work to this point, but now he was praising Jinshi’s efforts and loudly informing the populace about them.

What was more, Jinshi was showing his face before the people of the western capital for the first time. Yes, he had met with a handful of VIPs now and then, but a crowd of commoners? His courtly bearing and almost celestial beauty were not lost on the people. Maomao spotted several women who were clearly lovestruck.

Normally, he would probably try to be modest about all this, Maomao thought. But it was true that Jinshi had done all those things. There was no point denying it. The only person who might have a real cause to complain about Jinshi was the one who had been sent on a grueling grasshopper-slaying quest, Lahan’s Brother.

Speaking of whom, Lahan’s Brother was one of those watching things develop from inside the annex. He was so ordinary that Maomao would never have noticed him if it hadn’t been for the hoe he was carrying. He seemed to have it just in case he needed to defend himself against any outbreaks of violence—but had there really been no better weapons he could have grabbed? The hoe would make him look more like one of the marauding peasants.

Gyoku-ou’s voice carried clearly, less like he was lecturing and more like he was declaiming, delivering a speech in a play. And the people were riveted by it.

One of the commoners, however, raised a hand. “H-How is it the royal younger brother knew that this swarm was coming? H-How could he know, if he didn’t bring it himself?”

There were a few shouts of agreement from the crowd.

That’s a tough one.

If Lahan had been here, he could have broken down the statistics from the last several years, explaining how the climate and the smaller, local swarms had pointed in the direction of this larger one. But even if you had it all written down, many people here didn’t know their numbers. They

wouldn't know what the numbers meant, and they wouldn't be convinced by them.

Jinshi took a step forward. "Allow me to explain that. When we performed our divination rituals in the capital, it produced a sign of grave misfortune in the west. Given how greatly this city has flourished under the Gyoku clan in recent years, what manner of disaster could harm it? A swarm of insects seemed the only likely prospect."

A murmur ran through the crowd at the simple fact that the Imperial younger brother would directly address a commoner. His voice was lovely and bracing, but didn't carry as well as Gyoku-ou's.

Divination, huh?

Was it possible that was why Jinshi had brought Vice Minister Lu with him? He must have realized that talk about agricultural products and statistics on recent swarms would go over the heads of many of the commoners. Divination would be a much more intuitive explanation to them.

If you know the people are superstitious, comfort them with superstition. It wasn't a bad plan, Maomao thought—but almost immediately she discovered that it was a mistake.

Gyoku-ou looked like he had been waiting for Jinshi to say something like this. "Precisely! At this moment, we need the Moon Prince's power more than anyone else's!" He thrust his hands into the air as if calling the commoners to witness for him. "If the oracles of those who live above the clouds are for us, what can stop the western capital—indeed, I-sei Province itself—from thriving ever more mightily?"

The people began to thrum with Gyoku-ou's words. Those who had looked on Jinshi with hostility mere moments ago now turned to the Emperor's younger brother with eyes of hope. Many still looked displeased, but they no longer shouted and jeered.

"What say you? Shall we ask the Moon Prince to perform a ritual on our behalf?"

Gyoku-ou certainly knew how to work the crowd. The commoners raised their hands in approbation.

"Oof. So it's come to that," said Chue, not looking very happy. "He did bring Vice Minister Lu in order to perform a ritual. The answer would have to be..."

Before Chue could say what the answer would be, Jinshi acted.

"Understood," he said: his answer was affirmative. He had no other

choice, and anyway, the performance of a ritual had always been part of the plan during his visit here. It had simply been postponed by the swarm.

Gyoku-ou smiled a brilliant smile—but one that also spoke of triumph assured, and more than a little pride. “Then ask for I-sei Province’s further growth! Ask that the disaster from the west be itself brought low!”

Jinshi’s expression never changed, but those closest to him knew. They could see the subtle shift in his face that indicated a touch of dismay: *I’ve done it now.* Maomao couldn’t see Jinshi’s exact expression because of the distance and the dark, but she knew how it must look.

“He’s right!” shouted one of the commoners. “What good does it do us to blame the insects on the Moon Prince? Why would he bring such calamity upon us? Where did those bugs come from? It was from the west! Far to the west of us!”

“Yes, that’s right!” agreed someone else. Apparently this was the part where they were supposed to laugh—several of the commoners chuckled, although Maomao didn’t know why.

“Exactly,” Gyoku-ou said. “If there is fault to be found, it lies not with the Moon Prince, but with the one who was entrusted with the care of the western capital—me myself. I can only beg forgiveness. If the slightest offense has been given to you, our august visitor, please hold me responsible.” He turned to Jinshi and bowed dramatically.

“Goodness gracious,” Chue said, looking like she wasn’t sure what to make of this.

“What is more, if there was a failure to protect this city from the grasshoppers, that too is my responsibility, entrusted as I have been with leading this place on behalf of my father, Gyokuen. The people have starved, and the blame is mine. To all of you I can say only, I’m sorry.” Now he bowed toward the commoners.

“Master Gyoku-ou! Don’t bow to us!”

“That’s right! We did this by ourselves. You’ve done nothing wrong!”

The people were eager that Gyoku-ou should raise his head. Maomao realized that the scene had changed. Jinshi, who had been the star until a moment ago, had been overshadowed by Gyoku-ou.

“He’s right. The honored Imperial younger brother isn’t at fault here,” someone said.

“It’s those troublemakers from the west that brought the bugs!”

“Yeah, and now they’re trying to steal our food too!”

There were more shouts of agreement from the crowd.

Gyoku-ou had spoken of “the disaster that came from the west.” Maomao had assumed he meant the grasshoppers. But then...

Wait, what just happened?

He’d shifted the focus of the anger from the insects to the western lands themselves. Immediately to the west of I-sei Province was Shaoh.

“Looks like a new fire is starting,” Chue said, her eyes cold.

“A new fire?”

“I’m almost impressed. I wondered what was going on, but it turns out all the playacting has been leading up to this moment.”

“Playacting? What are you talking about?”

Chue twirled her finger and a pigeon appeared in her hand. “All of it. Calling the Moon Prince here, and the master strategist, deliberately affecting a bad attitude toward the Moon Prince, deliberately giving the common people a bad impression of him. All of it was calculated for this purpose. That might even include sending his adopted daughter to the rear palace. Now, that would be something.”

The pigeon went fluttering out of Chue’s hand.

“The west has to pay!”

“Let’s get our food back!”

“Crush the barbarian tribes!”

The people started thrusting their fists in the air. The murderous energy that had been directed toward the Imperial family just moments before had taken on a new focus.

“Master Lakan said this guy was looking to be a hero, but it looks to me like he’s just as good at playing supporting roles. Maybe better, in fact. Don’t you think?”

“What do you mean?” Maomao asked.

“Well, you see? This is a stage, put here by Master Gyoku-ou. He caused the Moon Prince to mount the stage without ever meaning to—heck, he even set him up in the lead role! He apologized exquisitely for the rudeness to the Imperial family and cleared up the people’s misunderstanding in one fell swoop. And now the Moon Prince is standing there looking like a gorgeous actor. Although I guess you could say that at the moment, he and Master Gyoku-ou are sharing the spotlight.”

Maomao understood what Chue was saying. Gyoku-ou had set up the Imperial younger brother and himself—the acting governor of the western capital—as the stars, and cast a foreign people in the role of the enemy. He had said nothing definitive himself, only guided the people to the

conclusions he wanted them to reach.

"What if Master Jinshi just stole it back?"

"Do you think he could? This crowd was a powder keg with his name on it until a minute ago. Besides, we're dealing with people who are easily swayed. The Moon Prince hasn't said anything untrue—but neither has Master Gyoku-ou. It's just that the people's attention has been—*shwip!*—swapped from the locusts to the foreign people who took their food."

Maomao followed her point here too. "He doesn't get his hands dirty. He doesn't kidnap anyone. But he's effectively taken a hostage. Clever stuff."

Chue nodded her agreement. Jinshi began to speak, but he couldn't offer a direct rebuttal. He only said that he would perform a ritual to expunge the destruction. It was unobjectionable, as Jinshi was wont to be, but it wasn't enough to completely dispel the people's misgivings.

Maomao swallowed hard and looked at Chue. "So what is Gyoku-ou after?" she asked, dropping any term of respect for the acting governor in spite of herself.

"Every hero needs a stage. But maybe the western capital isn't the stage he wants." Chue peered off to the west. "There must be some reason he's so eager to start a fight with Shaoh. Something besides simple profit."

Maomao, too, looked to the western sky. Somewhere over the horizon lay Shaoh, and beyond it, Hokuaren.

Chapter 16: Gyokuen's Children

Maomao watched Jinshi smack his head into a post. It was practically comical, seeing him bash himself against a pillar in the sumptuous chamber, surrounded by attendants.

"Young master, at least use this," Suiren said, inserting a wadded-up cotton jacket between Jinshi's head and the pillar. The sound went from *thump thump* to *bompf bompf*, which only made it seem sillier. Suiren didn't go so far as to try to stop him.

"He played me!"

"Like a two-stringed fiddle, sir."

"You're mocking me!"

"Yes I am, sir."

Maomao had her hands full trying to offer noncommittal responses. Just agreeing with everything Jinshi said was better than letting herself slip and accidentally try to suggest an actual solution. It was the same way she dealt with huffy courtesans; it always calmed them down.

"Are you even listening to me?!" Jinshi demanded.

"I'm listening, sir."

Apparently, it was still the wrong choice. In this case, instead of offering inoffensive comments, she should have tried to suggest a solution. But at that moment, Maomao didn't even have any ideas to offer.

Neither did the rest of Jinshi's entourage.

Gaoshun was the first to speak. "Moon Prince, has there been any communication from Empress Gyokuyou since then?"

When's "then"? Maomao wondered. She knew Jinshi and the Empress had been in touch with each other about Gyoku-ou's daughter. Was that what he meant?

"Communication? Yes. But I don't think she's in a good position to deal with Sir Gyoku-ou. For one thing, the Empress would have no way to know about this most recent event. Even if I contacted her as urgently as I could, I doubt it would be in time. But thankfully, she's already put me in touch with certain other connections."

Makes sense. Even the members of a single family were hardly going to be in lockstep. Maomao wondered who these connections were.

“What about Master Gyokuen, then?” Basen asked.

Jinshi paused for a second, then said, “I can’t be certain, but I doubt Sir Gyokuen had a hand in this. I’ve kept him apprised of the situation here, but there are certain things that I think he wishes to leave to his son’s judgment. He sends only the most ambiguous answers. I can only imagine that what he writes to Sir Gyoku-ou is quite different from what he writes to me.”

“You don’t suppose that his answers conflict with the report you’re getting, Master Jinshi?” Taomei asked. She seemed to be wondering if Jinshi’s letters were reaching Gyokuen at all.

“At the moment, I don’t think so.”

“I would agree,” came a voice from behind a curtain. Maomao was caught off guard for a moment, but then realized it was Gaoshun’s other son, Baryou. Chue flitted over and nudged the drape.

He’s gotten used to us enough to speak, huh?

She had no idea, though, how many more times she might have to visit before she saw his face. Maybe he would open up to her if she wore a duck mask.

Gaoshun picked up the thought. “Master Gyokuen’s policy was always to be on friendly terms with neighboring countries—and thus to keep them in check. He might make ‘suggestions’ or negotiate sometimes, but he never made an open declaration of hostility. I think that means it’s safe to assume Master Gyoku-ou did this on his personal initiative. At the same time, I can see why Master Gyokuen might hesitate to criticize his son’s approach.”

“Sir Gyokuen isn’t a young man anymore. He can’t be forever meddling in his son’s affairs,” Jinshi said.

True enough.

“Exactly, sir. Moreover, there must be more than a few among the populace who are dissatisfied with the way Master Gyokuen has done things. Master Gyoku-ou’s core group of supporters must include many disaffected former believers in Master Gyokuen.”

“One suspects.” Jinshi set the cotton jacket aside and sat down. “After all, not all the neighbors around here are necessarily good people.”

Maomao recalled a marriage ceremony that had taken place in the western capital last year. The wife-to-be, aghast at the idea of being taken to Shaoh by her husband, had tried to fake her own suicide in order to disappear. The entire family had been in on it, and solving the case hadn’t

made them any more eager to go through with the wedding.

They said the foreigners brand their wives like livestock.

There weren't *that* many idiots in the world who would deliberately let someone press a hot brand into their skin of their own volition. In fact, as far as Maomao knew, there was only one.

For that matter, he did it to himself.

She glowered at that idiot even as she mulled the present circumstances over in her mind. *So the people were upset with the Emperor's younger brother, and Gyoku-ou intervened. He somehow managed to blame everything on the foreigners, and now Jinshi is going to perform some kind of ritual.*

From the sound of things, this ritual had less to do with expunging sickness and more with making ready for the coming war.

At that moment, Jinshi had managed to put off the ritual, briefly, but now he was trying to figure out what to do.

"I don't suppose Sir Gyokuen would come home," Jinshi mumbled, but they all knew that was impossible.

"Unfortunately, sir, I don't think that will happen," Gaoshun said.

"You can't rely on others to solve your problems," Taomei added. Well, that accounted for both husband and wife.

This conversation didn't look like it was going anywhere fast. Maomao wasn't even sure why she was here. She had been summoned for the first time in several days, but before she'd had a chance to inspect Jinshi's burn, he was starting in on his trials and tribulations.

Miss Chue... Maomao thought grudgingly of the whimsical lady-in-waiting who had brought her here.

Maomao decided to try to get them back on track, by force if necessary. "I understand you're worried, sir, but the general thrust of the ritual *has* been determined, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Jinshi said slowly. "It's this." He showed her a piece of paper. It had two characters on it: *land* and *pacification*.

"The pacification of the land?"

"It was Vice Minister Lu's idea. He said this would be an appropriate justification for a state ceremony."

"I've heard of this kind of ritual...but not often."

"You understand what it means for this to be a state ceremony, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. It's usually a ritual His Majesty the Emperor performs to

venerate the ancestors and spirits, isn't it?"

"That's right. But when His Majesty is too busy to perform such a ceremony himself, I may perform it in his stead."

In fact, one such performance had led to an attempt on his life. If Maomao had studied more diligently for the court ladies' examination during her time as Jinshi's lady-in-waiting, she might have figured out his true identity sooner.

"Would you like to know the details of the ceremony?" Jinshi asked.

Maomao didn't mince words. "No thank you, sir. Just tell me exactly what it means to 'pacify the land.'"

"Very well. Typically these ceremonies have to do with venerating the ancestors and the spirits, or sometimes the heavens and the earth. In this case, however, since we're far from the capital, the suggestion was that perhaps the ritual should be focused on placating the local guardian spirit. In short, we pray to the devastated land that it will yield forth a rich harvest."

"If I may be so bold, sir, it sort of sounds like you just made up a new ritual out of whole cloth."

"Maybe not *whole* cloth. They say such rituals are practiced on the islands to the east."

"Let me see if I'm understanding you. Your hands would be tied if, immediately after the Emperor's younger brother had venerated the spirits, Master Gyoku-ou were to make a declaration of war on another country. Suppose that, instead, you didn't venerate the spirits generally, but only the very specific spirit of this area? What if the object of the ritual extended no farther than the borders of I-sei Province? Is that what you're thinking?"

"You show remarkably sharp insight for someone who claims not to understand politics," Jinshi said. Funny thing to be impressed by.

"It seems that you would be deliberately placing yourself outside the scope of your own ceremony."

"Yes, as would Vice Minister Lu, who originally came up with this idea. If we're lucky—very lucky—Sir Gyoku-ou simply won't try anything."

In concrete terms, Jinshi was worried that Gyoku-ou would take the occasion of the ritual to make an open declaration of war on another nation.

"He hasn't done anything outwardly yet, has he?" Maomao asked.

“No. He talked to myself and Sir Lakan about the possibility of war, but he hasn’t made any public moves. He was only sounding us out; he judged that he couldn’t act without our support.”

This was what made Gyoku-ou a dangerous man: he wasn’t going to go to war by himself; he sought to drag everyone else along with him.

The people of the western capital trusted Gyoku-ou implicitly, and the policy he was now contemplating was inspired by their views. It might indeed make them think he was a fine acting governor—but the world was not so simple.

The people of the western capital had their feelings. Their anger had to go somewhere. It had been pointed at the Imperial younger brother—and now it was pointed at a foreign nation. A simple solution in the short term, but a bad decision in the longer view.

“I opposed Sir Gyoku-ou’s plans, so he’s taken more forceful measures.”

“Yes. Disgusting measures. He ought to be good enough to declare the war himself and suffer the consequences himself,” Taomei spat.

“Now, that’s enough,” Gaoshun broke in. Basen might look like his father, but maybe he got his hot blood from his mother.

And this when there are so many foreigners in I-sei Province, Maomao thought, worried for the danger this might put them in. “How many foreign people *are* there in the western capital right now?” she asked. She’d seen the state of the crowd. If that mob happened across anyone with foreign blood, there seemed likely to be a violent attack. Where would the foreigners be hiding?

“That’s been taken care of by someone with a talent for such things. The strategist,” Jinshi said.

“That old fart?” Maomao shot back, scowling.

“As soon as the first wave of grasshoppers hit, he brought all the foreign merchant groups to a single place where they could be protected. Because, according to him, it would be ‘a pain’ to have them jumbled everywhere.”

“Do you think he *really* understands what’s going on?”

The freak with the monocle did everything on instinct, so it could be hard to fathom his actions.

“Many of the merchants went back home by sea, or continued overland to Kaoh Province. Even so, about a hundred of them remain in the western capital.”

“Is there anywhere they can hide?”

“The people here are not monolithic. Some are xenophobic, yes, but others see foreign people as invaluable neighbors. There’s an inn town near the port that caters to foreigners. He rented the entire place out.”

“That’s a pretty good trick.”

“Indeed. He knew just the person to ask. In fact, they should be joining us shortly.”

“Ahem... If we’re going to have a visitor, I’d like to wrap up my work here and get back,” Maomao said. The only person currently at the medical office was the quack doctor, who’d managed to sleep through the last major commotion. Meanwhile, it wasn’t just medicine they were out of. There weren’t enough bandages either, so Maomao had been planning to tear up some unused sheets to make new ones.

“I’m afraid our honorable guest has already arrived,” said Chue. Most unwelcome news.

Jinshi smirked. “You heard her. Wait in back if you would.”

“Yes, sir... But where’s ‘in back’?” Maomao looked around the room.

“Here, Miss Maomao, this way.” Chue urged her to a corner that was curtained off from the rest of the room. Behind it was a table and two chairs, the table already set with tea snacks. The space was small but not cramped. “It was so unfair that only my hubby got a spot. Miss Chue made one for herself too.”

“Wow! It’s so cozy,” Maomao said.

“Yes indeedy! If you need more snacks, they’re on the top shelf. Would you like tea or juice?”

“Tea, please.”

“Coming right up!” Chue bustled through a curtain on the other side.

“Maomao.” She heard Jinshi from the other side of the curtain. “I think things are going to get tiring. I need a charge.” His hand poked through the drapes.

“A charge?” Maomao asked.

She studied the shelf Chue had indicated. She took a mooncake wrapped in paper from a basket on the shelf and pressed it into Jinshi’s hand.

“Huh?!”

The mooncake dropped to the ground. The paper came off and, sadly, it touched the floor. Maomao moved to pick it up, but her right hand was caught by Jinshi’s. She felt his fingers slide between hers as if to make

sure she was there. The fact they were both using their right hands made it oddly awkward.

Jinshi's long fingers pressed into the back of Maomao's hand, while his palm pressed against hers. She could feel his pulse. His nails were neatly trimmed, but she could feel the calluses on his palm. Ink stained the tips of his fingers, and there was a sheen of sweat on his hand.

Maomao's palm had started sweating as well. She was hoping to get away before it got too bad. "Sir? What are you doing?" she asked.

"I told you. Charging."

"*Charging.*"

Dammit, so he *hadn't* been talking about getting some extra sugar? She looked reproachfully at the mooncake on the floor.

"I wanted to do it before I had to start pushing myself too hard."

"Maybe just *don't* push yourself too hard?"

Maomao breathed slowly, trying to keep her heart rate down, trying to keep the flush out of her cheeks and hands. Even so, her heartbeat and the sweating got away from her, and she could feel her hand growing slick.

"Only the most incompetent of leaders would find that an option, I'm afraid."

"If you let someone else steal credit for everything you do, you don't look like much of a leader anyway."

"That doesn't bother me. Those who know will know, and that's enough." He squeezed her hand tighter. Then the quality of his voice changed: "Our visitor is here."

"You must pardon my intrusion, Moon Prince," a man's voice said.

"Not at all. My apologies for summoning you when you're so busy," Jinshi replied easily, but his hand remained wrapped around Maomao's.

Is he going to hold the whole conversation this way?

Jinshi's back was to Maomao, but she couldn't even see that because of the curtain between them. All she knew was that his right hand was growing increasingly sweaty, betraying the emotions that he couldn't allow to show on his face.

Who was this visitor he was entertaining? What expression was he leveling at them? Did they really not realize that Maomao was right there, just out of sight?

She couldn't stand it anymore. She pinched the back of Jinshi's right hand with her left.

This doesn't count as disrespect! It doesn't!

“Please, be seated,” Jinshi said. Was it her imagination, or had his voice gone up an octave? At last Maomao worked her hand free, and his disappeared past the other side of the curtain.

Maomao held up her hand and inspected it. There were faint red marks on the back.

“Charging, huh?” she muttered.

“Who’s charging?”

Maomao just about jumped out of her skin and was lucky not to cry out. Chue was standing there with a tea platter.

“It’s nothing,” Maomao said.

“Really? Aww, look, you dropped your mooncake.” She grabbed it off the floor, blew the dust off it—and ate it. Then she said, “You don’t look very relaxed, Miss Maomao.”

“It’s your imagination, Miss Chue.” She tried her best to seem calm as they whispered back and forth.

“Okay, we’ll say it’s my imagination.”

Maomao didn’t answer immediately. She could never tell how much Chue actually knew. Instead she sat in one of the chairs and sipped her tea quietly. She could see the visitor through the gap in the curtain. “Isn’t he going to notice us watching him?” she asked.

“Not to worry. Lady Suiren is keeping an eye out to make sure he doesn’t see us. And he won’t hear us as long as we keep our voices down like this.”

If Suiren thought it wasn’t a problem, then it was fine.

The visitor looked to be in his mid-thirties, with tanned skin and red hair that seemed more weathered by the sun and sea breeze than due to foreign blood. Jinshi and the man sat across from each other at a table; Maomao and Chue could see them both in profile.

“Who is he?” Maomao asked.

“One of Master Gyokuen’s sons!”

A sibling to Empress Gyokuyou and Gyoku-ou, then.

“But he doesn’t look like either of them,” Maomao observed.

“That’s true. He has a different mother. Master Gyokuen has eleven wives and thirteen children.”

Maomao was quiet for a moment. Many rich men had a mistress or two in addition to their official wife, and apparently the easygoing old governor was no exception.

“That man there is his third son. His name is—well, you probably

wouldn't remember if I told you, so maybe we can just call him Gyoku-ou's Little Brother."

Chue was very offhand for someone saying something so rude, but as it was the undeniable truth, Maomao didn't object. Instead she said, "Like Lahan's Brother, you mean? Makes sense. I like it."

"Yes, exactly. Just be aware that unlike Lahan's Brother, this man *does* have a real, actual name."

Was she implying that Lahan's Brother didn't?

"Gyoku-ou's Little Brother is in charge of the port. It's thanks to him that we were able to rent out the inn district. He was very receptive—he seems to be on good terms with Empress Gyokuyou."

"So he's the mysterious connection." But then Maomao stopped and tilted her head. "Huh? If he has all that power, why wouldn't he speak up about what's going on in the western capital right now? And what about all the other siblings?"

There were apparently thirteen of them, and Maomao only knew about three. Weren't the children of powerful people supposed to squabble more?

"I think that has something to do with the way Master Gyokuen educated his kids. Gyoku-ou's Little Brother's mother was a sailor. And all the other mothers each work in a particular field."

"So basically, the siblings all follow in their mothers' footsteps?"

"Pretty much. Master Gyokuen has a talent for more than just collecting wives. He brings exceptional people in each field into his family. Just like how he maneuvered his way right into the Imperial bloodline!"

As a merchant, nothing Gyokuen did was wasted. He had sent Empress Gyokuyou to the rear palace, armed with the twin weapons of her beauty and wit.

"All right, but let's be frank. Master Gyokuen's only actual successor is Master Gyoku-ou, right? I know he's the eldest son and all, but the other siblings really don't have any problem with that?" Maomao asked. The bigger a household was and the more assets it had, the more likely family strife was to break out. Eleven wives and thirteen children seemed like a recipe for disaster in that department.

"Master Gyokuen's wives appear to have a hierarchy. A nice, clear division between Master Gyoku-ou's mother, his official wife, and the rest, who are all concubines."

“I see.” Gyokuen had only one “true” wife, Gyoku-ou’s mother—the rest were merely mistresses he had taken to forge specific relationships.

He’s more ruthless than he looks. Gyokuen came across like a pleasant, not to say doddering, old man, but Maomao found her image of him completely changed.

“I understand what he’s doing, then, but I can’t help thinking his many wives’ many families might have something to say about it.”

“By all appearances, he’s handled that situation very well.” Chue stuffed some mooncake into her mouth and peeped out through the curtain. Gyoku-ou’s Little Brother was reporting on the situation of the foreigners holed up at the inns.

“We’re managing so far, somehow,” he was saying.

“That’s a great help,” Jinshi replied. “Even if one considers the current emergency an extenuating circumstance, an attack by the people here upon the foreign population could quickly spiral into a diplomatic incident.”

“A diplomatic incident,” the tanned man repeated with some sarcasm. “Depending on how my older brother plays his cards, it may turn out there was no point to me hiding anyone.”

That was a very unsettling thing to hear. Gyoku-ou’s Little Brother was built like a rough-and-ready sailor, but he seemed to know how to put on a polite tone in front of the Emperor’s younger brother.

“If you’ll forgive my saying so, Sir Gyoku-ou seems set on war. How has he behaved among you siblings?” Jinshi asked.

“I couldn’t say for certain, but I have an idea.” Gyoku-ou’s Little Brother clasped his gnarled hands. “All of us called our eldest brother’s mother Lady Seibo, ‘the Western Mother.’ Perhaps you know that she was formerly a member of the Windreader tribe?”

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

Perhaps the name was derived from that of the goddess Sei-ou-bo, the Western Queen Mother; or perhaps they called her that because she was the “mother” of the western capital. Or maybe her name even included the character for “west.” Maomao didn’t know.

“Lady Seibo was a kind woman, very concerned for those who had formerly been members of her tribe. She went with our father on his business expeditions, and any time she saw a former Windreader among the slaves, she would free them, or so I’ve been told.”

“That would mean Sir Gyoku-ou went with her?”

“Yes, sir. A great many members of the Windreader tribe were found in

Shaoh. Many of them had been viciously mistreated by the people there; they were practically skin and bones. My mother met many of them in their last moments."

Maomao listened. This sort of made sense to her...but sort of didn't. Chue seemed to be of the same opinion; she was frowning.

"What do you think, Miss Maomao?" she asked.

"I'm not sure how to answer that. It would certainly be one reason to want to go to war, but it seems like it must be just one reason out of many."

That was her honest opinion. She understood it, as a justification, but on its own it was too little. Wanting revenge for one's people was understandable, but tribes all over the plains had attacked the former Windreaders. Meanwhile, foreigners hardly had a monopoly on mistreating their slaves. As a political matter, such things were barely more than excuses.

Jinshi, as it turned out, had much the same questions as Maomao and Chue.

"Is that the only reason?" he asked bluntly. "I realize Sir Gyoku-ou is your eldest sibling, but surely that doesn't silence the younger members of the family completely. Is it not precisely because you disagree with him, Sir Dahai, that you were willing to entertain what I had to say?"

So Gyoku-ou's Little Brother's name was Dahai. It meant "Great Sea," certainly an appropriate name for a sailor.

But he doesn't have "gyoku" in his name.

That, Maomao realized, was the sign that this man didn't stand in the line of succession. She wondered if Gyokuyou had always had the "gyoku" element in her name because of her exceptional qualities, or if she had changed her name when she entered the rear palace.

"I presume Sir Gyoku-ou can't afford to ignore the master of the harbors just because that man is his younger brother. What did he use to negotiate with you?" Jinshi asked.

Dahai flinched, but then smiled. "You should get out among the people more, Moon Prince. Then they might cease to believe that you're nothing but a figurehead."

"Get out among the people and do what? Would you have me paraded around like a portable shrine at a festival?" Jinshi continued to look every inch the royal, but his tone had grown rather informal. He must have already met this man several times before; Maomao just hadn't known

about it. Otherwise, Dahai would never have dared to speak as frankly as he just had.

"My eldest brother tempted me with the rights to Shaoh's ports. Currently, ships from other countries pay through the nose to use them. Products from a great many lands find their way to Shaoh, coming on a great many ships, and Shaoh has them all over a barrel. They need those ports. My brother informed me of his intention to take the ports and put me in charge of them. I would clear at least *this* much easily."

He held up five fingers to indicate the amount. Maomao couldn't even imagine that many zeros.

"And?"

"And what?"

"He may speak of giving you rights, but all I see is a drastic increase in your workload. As capable as you are, Sir Dahai, even you can't single-handedly manage *two* major ports with foreign ships coming and going. Unless you have some plan for splitting yourself in half and becoming two people? Have you become a master of the immortals' arts without my knowing it?" Jinshi was teasing—taunting—him.

Dahai's expression didn't change. "I have someone who serves as my right hand. And my left. And both feet. I'll let them handle things."

"You'd send your most valuable people to a land that seems set to become a battlefield? I'd heard mariners valued their shipmates, but perhaps I was misinformed." Now Jinshi was openly provoking the other man.

What's he up to? Just witnessing this was enough to put Maomao's nerves on edge. It had to be taking a toll on both Jinshi and Dahai. *Now I see why he wanted a "charge."* It had to be mentally and emotionally draining to keep up this conversation.

"Perhaps that suggests to you how important these rights are," Dahai said.

"Very well. Then what's keeping the rest of your siblings quiet? There can't be many carrots as large as those harbor rights. If anything, I would expect the opposite—that they would find the costs of invading another country unduly burdensome."

After a moment, Dahai said, "I have no doubt my brother explained to each of our siblings the advantages of supporting him."

Maomao and Chue were still peeking from behind the curtain. They were out of mooncakes, and Chue had moved on to nibbling on a fried

dough twist.

"Are you sure I should be seeing this?" Maomao asked her.

"Sure, it's fine!"

"No, I mean... If Dahai found out, wouldn't he be upset?" Maomao knew she would be, if she found out that some ladies-in-waiting had been eavesdropping on secret conversations *she'd* been having.

"I think he's already upset just having to deal with the Moon Prince. His Majesty's younger brother may have a low opinion of himself, but he always manages to get the job done."

True enough.

Dahai had to be more than a dozen years older than Jinshi, but it was the prince who held the initiative in this conversation. It looked like he knew something, something important.

Did Empress Gyokuyou give him some kind of inside information? No, wait...

Jinshi placed a black lump on the table.

"Would this be the advantage you're talking about?"

It was some kind of rock. The glossy sheen on its surface made it look like obsidian, but it wasn't.

"I believe in I-sei Province you call this the burning stone," Jinshi said.

The burning stone... A stone that burns... Coal?

Maomao remembered what tousle-glasses had written in his letter.

"They say there's a mountain near the port in Shaoh that produces coal. Take control of the port and one could—and no doubt would—start digging it up, yes?" Jinshi asked. Then he said, "I see that I-sei Province is more desperate for fuel than we are in the central region. Dramatic temperature differences between day and night, no doubt many deaths of freezing in the winter. Without much timber, your main sources of fuel are straw and animal dung, but the supplies of both are unstable. The suggestion that there might be a steady stream of fuel to be had is one that could easily sway an entire family of siblings. Now, here is the question..."

Oh, man, I hate that look.

Jinshi was making the face he always made when he was about to bring Maomao some kind of problem. She'd lost count of the number of times when, in the rear palace, she'd met that unctuous expression with the look of someone observing an upside-down cicada.

"Sir Dahai, neither you nor Sir Gyoku-ou brought up the subject of coal. Why not?" Jinshi asked.

Argh! I really hate that look!

Maomao was starting to sympathize with Dahai. Jinshi could be brutal. He only acted when everything was ready and there was no longer any escape.

"Records show that there used to be mining in I-sei Province—a modest amount, I grant, but it was there. Now you no longer do it. May I ask why not?"

"Can't a mine dry up?" Dahai replied.

"Did it?"

Dahai studied Jinshi for a moment. "What are you saying, sir?" There was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Oh, nothing. I've simply been wondering what would happen if the central region were to reconsider the value of coal, and perhaps include it on our surveys. What do you suppose would happen if it turned out someone had been hiding coal that they should have been sending to us?"

Lahan's riddling letter had been a way to try to tell them that I-sei Province had a hidden coal mine.

"All reports of coal mining ceased seventeen years ago. Did something happen in the midst of the chaos surrounding the Yi clan?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir."

"You're telling me you've been using coal without knowing it?"

"Is that an accusation?"

Dahai and Jinshi squared off. The easy friendliness of their conversation earlier only made this moment harder to bear.

"I've heard that the western capital's ironworks are thoroughly blackened."

"That happens when you make iron."

"True. Ash is ash, whether you burn wood or coal." Maomao thought she saw Jinshi glance in her direction for a split second. "However, the smell—that can't be hidden, can it? More to the point, we have confirmation of large quantities of coal being brought into the ironworks."

Chue had told Maomao about coal's unique smell. It had led them to the ironworks, where they had collected indisputable evidence. Jinshi was very thorough.

Dahai continued to play at being evasive, however. "It's not so unusual to import coal from other countries. I question how you can be so sure our supply comes from I-sei Province itself."

"Perhaps you'd let me see your manifests, then. Presumably any

imported coal would have to come via ship." Jinshi's perfect lips curled into a smile.

"You seem willing to be much firmer with the younger brother than the elder." Dahai looked openly exasperated.

"When a person has proof, he can be as firm as he wishes." It was a bit of a fig leaf for the Emperor's younger brother, but it was his way of signaling that he was not going to simply force matters using his authority. "Besides, we don't have to make this difficult. I have an easy way out for you."

After a long moment Dahai said, "I should have known I would never get the better of you."

"There was a secret agreement with the former emperor—or perhaps I should say with the empress regnant—regarding the use of coal, was there not?" Jinshi asked.

"What would ever give you that notion?"

"You have no idea how prickly the bean counters in the royal capital can get. The mere annihilation of an entire clan would never convince them that they should get *less* tax money than they did the year before."

Maomao could just picture Lahan working his abacus, which he always carried despite the fact that he did all his math in his head. It was frankly obnoxious.

"So there was a tacit agreement with the court about the matter of the coal. And yet you come here with your accusations, Moon Prince?"

"I said, didn't I? That it was a secret agreement with the former empress dowager, the empress regnant. The current sovereign had, and has, no part in it. Say the Emperor doesn't know about it, or knows but stays silent. How would people react if *I* spoke up? I can already see the gleam in the eyes of the Board of Revenue. They would demand seventeen years' worth of back taxes, every last pebble they're owed. Yes, I think that would cause a reevaluation of the worth of coal."

Stupid, stupid face!

Had he really needed a charge? He seemed well in control of this situation.

"Are you threatening me? Here I thought you had saved our people from the depredations of the grasshoppers. Has it been your true aim all along to ravage us in their stead?"

"It was merely a suggestion. Did I not tell you that there was an easy way out? Let's say I am all too ignorant in these matters. I hardly know

coal exists, let alone what it's worth. It's just a bunch of stones. Good enough?"

"And...what do you ask in exchange for this ignorance?" Dahai scowled at Jinshi.

"To be quite frank, I see no advantages in making war. A man is welcome to gamble with his own money if he wishes—but I cannot approve of dragging the entire country into such a wager. Should Sir Gyoku-ou use the occasion of my ritual to make anything resembling a declaration of war, I expect the people to be very much on his side. I may object, but I could easily see us sliding into an invasion of another country just the same."

"You're saying you wish me to stop my elder brother's plan, then?"

"Precisely. If there is war, I think the consequences to you will be far more dire than an investigation into coal by the royal capital. But Sir Gyoku-ou will be unable to make any war without your ships to carry the invasion force."

It was as Jinshi said. Maomao pictured a map of the region in her mind as best she could. I-sei Province was home to vast plains, where food was scarce. An invasion entirely overland seemed impossible.

"I also think it's you, Sir Dahai, who understands best of all the problems that can be caused by strife among siblings. Do you think you could bring some of the others around if you used my name?"

"Would there be any advantage to me in doing such a thing?"

"As I said. Coal is merely a rock, worthless to the central region."

Maomao sipped her tea, long gone cold, and felt a pang of sympathy for Dahai. It had to hurt, being tied into knots by a boy more than ten years his junior. But if it did, that pain wasn't apparent on his face.

Puzzled, Maomao turned to Chue, who was looking sadly at the very last of the fried dough twists.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue," she said.

"Yes, Miss Maomao? What is it?"

"I just had a thought. Is this what they call a rigged game?" she asked idly.

"Hoo hoo hoo! It's tough being on top, isn't it? You need a good pretext to convince any of the siblings!"

Maomao realized why Dahai looked so placid even as Jinshi used him mercilessly. He was, and always had been, on Jinshi's side. But there was a hierarchy to the sibling relationships; he couldn't just bull around doing

what he pleased. He needed there to be some reason he was forced to cooperate with Jinshi, and he had come here to get it.

Suddenly, Maomao felt stupid for having been on tenterhooks the entire time.

A charge, my ass! The cold sweat—all of it felt silly. *God, I hate politics.*

Maomao was reminded, painfully, of why she loathed being involved with anything political.

Chapter 17: In the Shadow of the Ritual

The eightieth day.

The ritual Jinshi would perform, Maomao gathered, was to be a middle rite. She didn't know much about the niceties of state ceremonies, but she was given to understand that the rituals performed by the Emperor could be divided into great rites, middle rites, and lesser rites, and that the exact nature of the ceremony varied with the scale.

The officiant has to purify himself for three days before a middle rite.

She remembered Jinshi doing this once when she'd been assigned to him as a lady-in-waiting. It had involved him eating ascetic meals and performing some sort of ritualistic gestures before he got in the bath. She also remembered Jinshi, who'd still had some growing to do, looking rather disappointed by the quantity of the meals.

"So the festival's to be tomorrow," said the quack doctor with his typical lack of concern as he rolled up a strip of torn sheet.

"I suppose you could call it a festival, but you know there won't be any food stalls or anything, right?" Maomao made sure the pills that had come out of their wooden mold were all perfectly round, then placed them neatly on a wicker tray. It was stomach medication, made with substitute ingredients because there was nothing like enough actual medicine around. If they ran into the freak strategist's aide, she intended to give him some.

The ceremony would be performed in a large open plaza in the middle of the western capital. There was a shrine there; it was a very prominent spot.

"Master Lihaku," Maomao said.

"Hm? Yeah?" The big-mutt-like soldier was cutting a sheet into neat strips with a knife.

"Are we sure that having a festival at this moment won't backfire and cause violence instead?"

"That's a real tough question. Our one saving grace is that everything I've seen of that plaza makes it look easy to defend. It's circular, so we can surround it, and it's big, which will make it hard to fire an arrow into it." So it wasn't, from his perspective, a dangerous location. "The one real

potential problem is if the people turn into a mob and just pile past us."

"Yeah, there wouldn't be much you could do about that."

Even impeccably trained soldiers could only do so much to resist sheer numbers.

Maomao hoped there wouldn't be any injuries, but who knew what the day would bring? It was even possible that an unruly mob would rip off Jinshi's robes and discover the burn on his flank.

"What I can say is that there's been less violence the last few days," Lihaku said, handing the shredded sheet to the quack doctor. "The mob that night seems to have helped things calm down, at least a little bit."

"You mean because Master Gyoku-ou spoke directly to the people?"

"Uh-huh. And it sounds like his younger brothers have been trying to talk people around as well."

That must come from the brother Jinshi talked to.

Gyokuen's family held control of every industry in the western capital. Anyone who went against them would find life in the city very, very difficult.

"Security's still tight, though. There are still people around claiming that it's the Imperial younger brother's fault that that swarm broke out." As a soldier, Lihaku was kept abreast of each day's security preparations.

Then Maomao asked the question that was bothering her most. "How do you expect Master Gyoku-ou to act during the ceremony?"

How would he behave, this man who lusted for war? Maomao didn't think he would just stand by quietly, checked by his younger brothers. She only hoped that he wouldn't launch into his speech in the middle of the ritual.

"We expect him to give a formal greeting, of course. In the interests of security, he'll wait at the administrative office until his moment. It sounds like his speech will be at the end, after everything else is over."

Using the administrative office as a staging area was perfectly understandable; it wasn't far from the plaza. And yet...

"Doesn't that seem like it's sort of putting Master Gyoku-ou squarely in the spotlight?" Maomao asked.

"I'd say it does," Lihaku replied.

Providing security was going to be tough enough; splitting them into two groups seemed especially questionable. Gyoku-ou was the one the people trusted. Wouldn't they be more likely to stay calm if he were at the plaza with them?

Not to mention, having the less socially important person show up late would normally be unconscionably rude. The sight of Gyoku-ou arriving from the administrative office with his attendants and bodyguards in tow would leave a profound impression on the onlookers.

"Let me guess. Was this Master Gyoku-ou's idea?"

"Actually, no," Lihaku said, closing his eyes and stroking his chin, which was gradually acquiring a stubble. There were no longer any razors fine enough to shave facial hair, so he had to go without. "What I've heard is that Master Gyoku-ou's younger brothers and sisters wanted to get together to discuss matters before the ceremony. But there wasn't much time, and tomorrow was the only time they could do it."

"Well, well." Maomao was impressed; Dahai had been harder at work than she'd expected.

"The siblings seem to be split into factions supporting the eldest and the youngest."

"The youngest?" Maomao was perplexed for a moment, but then she had a vision of the red-haired Empress. "You mean Empress Gyokuyou?"

This was the first she'd heard about Gyokuyou being the youngest of Gyokuen's children, but she and Gyoku-ou were so far separated in age that it wasn't that surprising.

"That's right. The eldest son might inherit leadership of the clan, but the word of the Empress carries a lot of weight—even though she's his youngest sister. All the sisters are for Empress Gyokuyou, and even a few of the brothers."

"You're very well-informed, Master Lihaku." Maomao nudged the big soldier with her elbow.

"I talk with the other guards who come by here, and they've all been around. I hear a lot of things. The others used to say they were jealous of me because guarding the annex was supposed to be a cushy job, but since that mob the other night, I haven't heard a word from anyone."

"Is it just me, or does Master Gyoku-ou seem given to extreme policies? Doesn't that bother the people of the western capital?"

"That has to do with what 'layer' of the support base you're looking at. The group you're thinking of, young lady, has a bunch of Master Gyoku-ou's supporters in it. If you change your perspective, a lot of other things change with it."

"I feel like it didn't used to be that way," Maomao objected as she helped untangle the quack from the strips of sheet he'd gotten himself

caught in.

"Time passes, things change. The more upset the people get, the more they pressure their politicians. And then later, they complain that they don't like how it turned out."

"Is that how it works?" Maomao rolled up the cloth. She just hoped the ritual would go smoothly.

The next day was bright and blue, not a cloud in the sky. That wasn't specifically a sign of good fortune in the western capital, where it hardly rained anyway, but it still made a nice backdrop for a ceremony. The impending festivities did something to dispel the gloom that had clung to the city the past several months.

"What do you think, young lady? Shall we go up?" the quack doctor asked, heading up the stairs with his steamed potato in hand. He and Maomao had to stay and watch the medical office, but the plaza was visible from the third floor of the annex, and they decided to watch from there.

Maomao had suggested that she should go to the ritual site in case anything happened, but Jinshi had rejected that idea. He seemed to think his life would be far harder if Maomao got hurt than if he himself did.

I don't really expect Jinshi to be injured, anyway—and the freak strategist is *at the ceremony.* If Maomao were there too, he seemed likely to interrupt proceedings.

Instead she got to watch from the third floor of their building, which had an excellent view and a nice breeze. In the room with her and the quack were Chue, Lihaku, the duck, and, for some reason, Lahan's Brother.

"What? You think it's wrong of me to be here?" Lahan's Brother asked, glowering at her. The duck raised her bill in imitation of his expression. Lahan's Brother must have been looking after the duck for Basen, who was serving as Jinshi's bodyguard.

"Did I say anything out loud?"

"I saw it on your face. It hurts to know I was right."

"I'm sorry." Maomao tried to make Lahan's Brother feel better by offering him a steamed potato, but he jumped back, saying he'd had more than enough of them. The duck comforted him.

"I can see them, but it's so far away. They're all so small," the quack said, squinting. The stage was visible from where they were, but they

couldn't make out the participants' faces. They could still tell which one was Jinshi, though—even at this distance, he was obnoxiously unmissable.

"That's a good thing. From this far away, even the best archer couldn't hit them," remarked Chue, a rather unsettling thing to say. Maomao scanned the buildings near the plaza; the only ones as tall as the annex were the administrative office and the main house.

The quack squinted some more. "I feel like an arrow could reach from farther away than where we are." From their room to the center of the plaza was perhaps two hundred meters in a straight line.

"With a longbow or a crossbow, maybe, but how would you hit anything like that? And even if by some miracle you did, the arrow would never have the force to actually kill whoever it hit. We call that 'effective range,' and it's usually less than a hundred meters," Lihaku said, providing helpful military background.

"Oh. Well, that does make me feel better." The quack stuffed some potato into his mouth in relief.

"Are you *absolutely* sure it's safe?" The objection came from Lahan's Brother. He sat cross-legged on the ground, petting the duck, who perched in his lap. "How far an arrow flies or whether it hits its target is all down to the skill and strength of the archer isn't it? Or suppose they've developed a more advanced bow—it might be a lot more dangerous than you think, couldn't it?"

Lahan's Brother could do most things well. He might not be the most exceptional man in any one field, but he was tremendously versatile.

"You're absolutely right, Lahan's Brother. But I just don't think a bow and arrow are going to be much of a threat here. The bow has a long history—it's not going to change much now. A *feifa* firearm—now, there's a weapon with a lot of growing to do. That could be really dangerous one day."

"A feifa? I'm surprised to hear you mention that," Maomao said. Lihaku was a soldier, someone who trusted in his own strength. She was surprised to realize he might put stock in firearms.

"Uh-huh. A feifa's less powerful than a bow right now, but look how portable it is, just a little tube. That's the scary part. Tools get more and more powerful as they're improved. And tools that don't rely on the user's strength—those only get better and better the more improvements are made."

"Er, well, then, wouldn't it be dangerous if someone had one of these

fay...fay-fah?" the quack asked, clearly unsure what a feifa actually was.

"It sure would!" Lihaku declared. So much for reassuring the old doctor.

"Lihaku! If someone targets the officiants with one of these firearms, what's the point of all your guards?" Lahan's Brother asked, despairing. He set the duck to one side.

"Fair question. But feifa still have too many shortcomings to be used in an assassination. I just don't expect to see anyone try anything with one at this ceremony. There. Feel better?"

He sounded so sure of himself that even Maomao was willing to believe him.

"The threat of violence worries me more," Lihaku said. "But things seem quiet for now."

"And they'll probably stay that way, as long as we're giving out food," Lahan's Brother said, skeptical. "Look. See that over there?"

"See what over where?" Chue asked, squinting. Maomao looked too, and saw crowds of people surrounding what appeared to be shop stalls.

"They're handing out some extra food that arrived. Well, potatoes, to be specific."

"Potatoes," Maomao echoed. Just how crazy was Lahan's Father for potatoes? Lahan's Grandpa and Lahan's Mother had seemed resentful of their rustic dwelling, but Maomao suspected that just by selling potatoes, their income probably far surpassed that of the freak strategist's debt-riddled estate. They'd built a veritable Potato Palace.

"They went to the people who normally do the food stalls at this sort of thing and got them to pass the potatoes out. They get experienced food handlers, and it helps with employment."

"Hoh," Maomao said, taking a sip of tea. It was thin, made with well-used leaves. The potatoes would make things easy, because they didn't even need to be peeled: with a modicum of fuel, they could be roasted. It was very Jinshi-esque to think not just of handing out food, but of how to use that to obtain a variety of economic benefits.

"They've added an extra detail too," Lahan's Brother informed them. "They brand each potato to identify it as coming from His Majesty's younger brother."

Maomao spat out her tea so hard that it got into her nose and threatened to fly up into her eyes.

"Huh? What's your problem?" Lahan's Brother asked, patting her on

the back.

"N-Nothing. Nothing. Just, isn't it sort of impertinent to put the Moon Prince's sigil on a potato?"

"It's a simplified version, just a crescent moon. It wouldn't have been possible to do anything too detailed."

Maomao wondered, concerned, if Jinshi was doing this as a form of self-flagellation.

"Branded potatoes! Now that sounds interesting. Miss Chue will just go get some," Chue said, *shhp*-ing to her feet.

"We have potatoes right here," Maomao said.

"She will also see if there are any tempting snacks around. In other words, Miss Chue is tired of watching."

"Now, that's no fair, Miss Chue. You expect me to just stay here and watch the place?" Lihaku said.

"Sure do! Have fun!"

And with that, Chue left.

Maomao dabbed at her face with a handkerchief and looked out at the plaza. A man in highly conspicuous clothing—presumably Jinshi—was walking through it. She couldn't hear what he was saying, but she caught the faint sounds of musical instruments, carried to them on the breeze.

She munched a potato and hoped nothing would happen.

Chapter 18: The Siblings' Conference

Rikuson looked around the meeting room and wondered why he was there.

He was in the largest room in the administrative building, and with him were Gyokuen's children. Eight of them, including Gyoku-ou, all seated at a round table.

As far as Rikuson was aware, Gyokuen had thirteen children. One of them was Empress Gyokuyou. Gyokuen's second daughter, Rikuson had heard, had accompanied him to the royal capital as his aide.

That left eleven children in the western capital, which meant three of them weren't here. Maybe it was just that hard to get everyone together at the same time, or maybe only one representative had been sent from each mother's brood.

Rikuson looked around at the siblings, matching them with his memory. Gyoku-ou was the oldest son, of course. To his left was the second son, and to his right, the third. The third son was on good terms with Empress Gyokuyou, and had met several times with His Majesty's younger brother as well. Both of them sometimes came to the administrative building.

Gyokuen's eldest daughter sat next to the second son, and the third daughter sat next to the third son. It was the custom in the western capital for the most respected person to sit farthest away from the entrance, but at the same time, the eldest daughter was older than the second son. So they weren't going strictly by age here, but discriminating by gender.

The fourth son and daughter as well as the fifth daughter were missing. There were also three faces that Rikuson didn't recognize. He presumed they were the only siblings he hadn't yet accounted for—the fifth, sixth, and seventh sons. Assuming they were seated in order, that would make the man sitting directly across from Gyoku-ou the seventh son.

Behind each of the seated siblings was another chair, in which sat an aide or attendant. Behind Gyoku-ou alone there were two chairs—his confidant was in one of them, and, for some reason, Rikuson was in the other.

Rikuson couldn't have felt more out of place, but Gyoku-ou had

summoned him to this conference, so there was nothing he could do but go. By all rights, Rikuson should have been in the plaza, observing the ritual.

"So, Elder Brother? What, pray tell, have you summoned us here for today?" asked the eldest daughter, a woman somewhere in her forties with a hawklike nose.

"As I've already explained. I wish to discuss the future of the western capital—no, of I-sei Province itself." Gyoku-ou spread his hands wide. His large, solid frame made his eldest sister look that much more delicate and willowy. The people at the table might all have been siblings, but with each of them having a different mother, they all looked very distinct from each other.

"I can't go along with what you're suggesting, Eldest Brother," the third son said in a firm voice. His sunbaked skin and hair marked him out as a man of the sea. Rikuson remembered that this son was in charge of the ports, and that he could be even more influential than the second son. Gyoku-ou would have to be careful with him.

"Oh no, Dahai? Whatever happened to listening to your older brother?" Gyoku-ou sniffed. He wasn't dealing with a child, though, but with a man in his mid-thirties.

"I understand what you're trying to say. You're referring to what you already told me, yes?" Dahai asked with a glance at Rikuson.

"Don't worry. Everyone in this room is free to hear about it," Gyoku-ou said. His way of indicating that Rikuson was on his side, perhaps. Or maybe that he didn't care if the story got back to the Imperial younger brother.

Dahai looked straight at Gyoku-ou. "You want to attack Shaoh? Our father would never stand by and let you do such a thing. You may be acting governor, Brother, but this is going too far."

"I agree with Dahai," said the second brother, a heavyset, tanned man. He was in charge of land transport, Rikuson recalled. "The profits you envision from this war seem hazy compared to the costs of waging it. I'm a merchant. I recoil from the idea of sending my laborers to the battlefield—and if we should lose this war, imagine the debt we'd be in!"

Several of the other siblings voiced their agreement with the second son's assessment. Gyoku-ou, however, appeared calm. "My, my. Did you all have a little conference of your own before you came to confront me? I seem to remember you being more *open* to my suggestion before."

“I do not agree.”

“Nor I,” said the eldest and third daughters. The third daughter had a striking face and an ample body; she looked substantially younger than her thirty-odd years.

When the older sisters spoke up, the younger men, from the fifth son on down, looked around uneasily. The eldest sister ignored their discomfort, continuing, “Where am I supposed to sell my carpets if we start a war? I finally managed to make major inroads into Shaoh.”

Then the third sister spoke up. “And I won’t be able to make my grape wine anymore. Since I assume you’ll get your conscripts from among the farmers? You can’t take my winegrowers, I’ll tell you that. We’ve finally gotten to where people think our wine tastes better than the imported stuff. More and more people in the royal capital are buying it!”

Neither of them were happy. Although they were women, they had real parts to play here. They were full-blooded merchants, true daughters of Gyokuen, and it seemed to set the men back on their heels.

“Harsh words, my younger sisters. Harsh words,” Gyoku-ou said with a grim smile.

“Harsh? I’ve been entrusted with the western capital’s whole textile industry. If we go to war, our best work will cease to sell. Do you know how many craftspeople will end up on the street? Hundreds if not thousands of workers and their families would starve—and you expect me to just go along with this? I would need a guarantee of at least a decade of supply and security on the other side, or I don’t even want to talk about it.”

“My. Such demands.” Gyoku-ou looked troubled. Just for a second, it almost seemed the younger sister had succeeded in outtalking her elder brother, but the concern soon disappeared from Gyoku-ou’s face. “From what I hear, land and sea transport, textiles, and winemaking are all doing quite well for themselves. They’ll be able to continue happily in spite of the swarm.” He stroked his chin, then turned to look at the three silent brothers. “What about ironmaking, ceramics, and animal husbandry? How are they doing?”

One man hesitantly raised his hand. He couldn’t be older than Rikuson, maybe even quite a bit younger. He was small but muscular; from his seating position, Rikuson took him to be the fifth son.

“To be honest, not very well,” he said. “We built a blast furnace in the western capital as Father suggested, but it hasn’t improved profitability. It was never going to!”

“Why not? Aren’t you doing the work? I know there’s constant demand for iron.” The third daughter narrowed her large eyes and looked at her little brother.

“We are! We’re working! But it doesn’t happen like you think. The capital’s port makes it easy enough to get iron ore, but we don’t have fuel! Straw and sheep shit isn’t enough to make an oven hot enough to melt metal. Kindling and charcoal are too expensive—and even if we could afford them, the city is overflowing with trade goods. Customers prefer higher-quality metalwork from abroad. We could work all we like, and we’d still have to sell for the lowest price.”

“Then make more *valuable* items!” the third sister said. She clearly thought this should have been obvious.

“We will! But do you have any idea how much groundwork has to be laid before we can do that? Didn’t you yourself get our father’s help until the wine from our region started selling?”

“Ahem! Well, yes, but...” The third sister looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“I’m with Fifth Brother,” said a heretofore quiet man in his mid-twenties, raising his hand. They seemed to be speaking in order of age, which would make him the sixth son. Rikuson could only watch the siblings bicker, as inert as the chair he sat in. “Ceramics, too, are difficult to manufacture without fuel. I’m as happy as any of you to see the western capital growing by leaps and bounds as it has been, but at the same time, prices are going up. Especially for fuel, as our limited supply is split among more and more people. That’s a simple fact of life.”

Unlike the fifth son, the sixth spoke calmly and rationally, but what he was saying was much the same.

“Guess that makes me last,” the seventh son began. He still had a baby face, but his cheeks and ears were riddled with scars. “As far as I’m concerned, you can oppose this war if you want. But I’m going to add thirty percent to the price of the wool from my flocks.”

“Wh-What?! Why?!” Demanded the eldest daughter, who was in charge of textiles.

“I’ve been holding down the price for ages now. Mother and Father and Grandpa have been talking among themselves—she’s family, they say. Give her a good price, they say. But when I’m in charge, I want to do business at the proper price. Honestly? Thirty percent is still a gesture of goodwill. It’s just like our brothers said—as the western capital grows,

prices go up. So why shouldn't the price of wool to make your textiles go up too?"

The fifth and sixth sons nodded in agreement with the seventh.

"Thirty percent at a stroke? That's absurd," the eldest daughter replied. "The price would normally increase in smaller steps!"

"And while that price is creeping up, the rest of us are going to die!" the seventh son exclaimed, staring daggers at his eldest sister. "Thanks to the insect swarm, my livestock have run away and my tents are in tatters. I would be willing to buy food, but no one will even sell to me—do you know what that's like? I've already had to sell a tenth of the livestock I had left. I know I can't get a fair price now for what I've already sold you. I was selling what wool and butter I had left to buy food, but now I can't even do that. You know, I've also been keeping down the price of sheep dung for the ironworks and pottery kilns. This winter looks like it's going to be a cold one. I won't have extra fuel to sell, and it's going to be all I can do to buy food for myself. Go ahead and whine about how I should cut family members a deal. It won't help. Because there'll be no one to give you a discount if I'm dead!"

The seventh son, Rikuson saw, was the youngest, but also the most combative of the siblings. The eldest daughter was scowling.

The seventh son seemed to have more he wanted to say. He looked Gyoku-ou. "Eldest Brother. This being the case, I ask you, this year, to open the supplies."

"The supplies," Gyoku-ou repeated.

"You know what I mean. I assume it's safe to be explicit here?" The seventh son's gaze swept those around the table. Just for a second, Rikuson felt the young man meet his eyes. "If I raise the price of wool *and* have coal to rely on, we might just survive. Somehow."

Rikuson only just managed to maintain his air of cool detachment at the seventh son's words. He was surprised to realize his heart was pounding, but he succeeded—he hoped—in looking genially perplexed. *Why, what's that?* his expression seemed to say.

"The burning stone? Yes, I need it too," said the sixth son.

"And me! Give some to me!" said the fifth.

Coal—the burning stone. As the name implied, it was a rock that would burn when you set fire to it. It wasn't mined in the central regions; there was scant use for it there, so it wasn't seen as valuable, but the same was not true of I-sei Province. Coal was often burned here to help stay warm in

a cold year. It was essential.

By now, Rikuson had a firm grasp on relations between the siblings. The older ones, whose businesses were successful, sought stability and didn't want war. But the younger ones had been forced to the brink by the insect swarm and could find themselves collapsing at any moment. That was where Gyoku-ou found his opening.

"In the long view, the benefits are numerous. If we capture Shaoh, we take its mine as well," Gyoku-ou said. "Moving coal via the ports will be easy, as will transporting goods into the interior. Our iron and ceramic works will grow, and no one will have to freeze to death ever again." He spoke clearly, fluently; the speech was well rehearsed.

Dahai rose from his seat. "You've done all your planning from behind a desk, Brother. Worse—you can't possibly know this will work. What makes you think Shaoh will fall so easily? How can you be sure they have a mine from which we can get coal? Shaoh is a neutral country. If Li attacks them unprovoked, other nations will not stand quietly by. You would anger Father, and worse, you would anger the Emperor. His love for our sister You won't save you then, not even with your nephew in line for the throne! The Yi were destroyed; you think they won't destroy us?"

Rikuson's heart started pounding again.

"The destruction of the Yi clan was unavoidable," Gyoku-ou said sadly, setting off murmuring among the brothers and sisters.

Rikuson took a deep breath. *Calm down,* he ordered himself. He looked around and saw that the siblings each had one of two expressions on their faces. The older ones looked anxious, while the younger ones looked lost. He realized that the youngest of them, everyone from the fifth son on down, had never learned the details of what had happened seventeen years before.

"The Yi clan attracted the attention of the empress regnant," Gyoku-ou said. "If they had been left to their own devices, the whole western capital might have been obliterated. Rotten fruit can spoil the box it's stored in, so that both must be thrown away. It was unavoidable."

He refrained from saying *why* they had drawn the empress's attention.

It was the second son who sighed deeply, rising from his own chair to put himself between Gyoku-ou and Dahai. "Both of you, calm down," he said. "Calm yourself, Dahai. I can see at least that our brother is trying to come up with some way to help the western capital flourish. We're all on edge because of the swarm. What will we do if you, who stand above

them, chafe and fret as well?”

“But Second Brother...”

“Don’t misunderstand. I oppose Brother Gyoku-ou’s suggestion, as you do. The fuel question is a crucial one, but not one that can be rushed. Right now, I believe we should be focusing on recovering from the disaster that has befallen us. Yes, it will be painful, but didn’t Father teach us siblings to help each other? And you, Eldest Brother, can you not wait a little while, until the heir apparent has grown older?”

At that, Gyoku-ou began to laugh. “Heh heh... Ha ha ha! How many years would you have me wait, little brother? What certainty do we even have that my nephew will safely ascend the throne?”

“Esteemed Brother Ou, you go too far!” the third sister said, striking the table.

Gyoku-ou’s eyes went wide. “You will call me Gyoku-ou!” he bellowed, raising his voice for the first time.

His anger put the third sister back on her heels; her own eyes widened slightly, but in dismay. She had committed a faux pas, and she knew it. “I apologize, Elder Brother Gyoku-ou,” she said.

Almost immediately, the smile returned to Gyoku-ou’s face. “It’s nothing. So long as you realize.”

The other siblings looked at him afresh. Until a moment ago, Rikuson would have said they were exchanging their opinions freely and without restraint, but when he saw how they reacted to Gyoku-ou’s shouting, he sensed a yawning gulf between them. Gyokuen had thirteen children, but only two of them carried “Gyoku” in their names: Gyoku-ou and Empress Gyokuyou.

The father of thirteen children he might have been, but Gyokuen had only ever had one successor, Gyoku-ou. As the one guaranteed to inherit, that made his might among his siblings absolute. His younger brothers and sisters could push back against Gyoku-ou only so far as he allowed them to. His outburst had reminded them of this fact. It had shown them that they held this discussion at Gyoku-ou’s pleasure alone. They were supporting actors whom Gyoku-ou had gathered on his stage.

Needless to say, “anonymous advisor” was not a speaking part. And that’s exactly what Rikuson was.

The mood in the room had become intensely uncomfortable. The second son hesitantly returned to his seat.

The talk, Rikuson thought, might normally have been more amicable,

but the insect swarm had left everyone living reduced lives for nearly three months now. Gyokuen's own children were unlikely to starve, but the weight of the responsibilities they bore frayed their nerves.

"I am not speaking of groundless fears," Gyoku-ou said. "I speak of the truth. Do you know how many of His Majesty's children have perished in the rear palace in these latter days?"

The brothers and sisters looked at each other in silence.

"You don't? Then let us ask someone who *comes* from that region. Rikuson, how many of the Emperor's honored children have left the world long before their time?"

Now all attention turned to Rikuson. So much for that minor role: he had been given a name. To have all of the siblings looking at him was almost unbearable, but there was nothing he could do except answer.

"When he was still the prince-in-waiting, one. Since his accession to the throne, three of his children have died prematurely."

"There you have it. Think how young the heir apparent still is. One cannot be certain of a child's life until at least seven years of age."

Children of the Imperial family were raised in better circumstances than those of the common folk, but even so, an infant could die all too easily, and even a grown child might still succumb to illness.

"Our younger sister You has a son, the heir apparent, and a daughter, a princess. But another of the royal consorts has a son nearly the same age as the heir apparent as well. You's child may stand next in line for the throne, but can we be sure he will stay there?"

By invoking this other woman, Gyoku-ou raised the prospect not only of death by illness, but of assassination.

"Do you mean to imply that Consort Lihua would make an attempt on the life of the heir apparent?" Dahai asked. Gyoku-ou shook his head.

"Ha ha ha. Is there not someone far more terrible than Consort Lihua?" He thrust a hand toward the window—toward the plaza where a state ceremony was presently being conducted.

"Eldest Brother, what are you saying?!" The second brother slammed his fist on the table and jumped from his chair.

"Elder Brother Gyoku-ou, I cannot countenance that utterance," said the eldest sister; she and the third sister both shook their heads. The other siblings likewise looked uneasy, each turning to their attendants. Rikuson hadn't been paying much attention to them—he had his hands full trying to watch all the siblings—but they, too, were obviously shaken by Gyoku-

ou's words.

"Why not? Surely it's clear why none of the royal offspring seem to survive. His Majesty loves his own brother, the Moon Prince, more than he does the children born in the rear palace."

That set the table buzzing.

"That can't be... Wait, could it?" someone asked.

"The Moon Prince?" someone else said.

Some were shocked, but to others, it seemed to make sense. Rikuson, for his part, wasn't sure how to react. The Moon Prince had spent years avoiding the public eye on the pretext of being weakened with illness. There were no other members of the royal bloodline, and there had always been rumors that the current Emperor doted upon his younger brother. They were both children of the same mother, after all. The Moon Prince was kept from public duties on account of His Majesty's overprotectiveness, some said.

When the younger brother had at last appeared, though, it turned out that he was as beautiful and as gossamer as a celestial nymph—and that he was also a hale young man as skilled in the military arts as the administrative. But what rocked the people who saw him was more than the revelation that the Emperor's younger brother was not a man to be dismissed. It was because, under the name Jinshi, this man had spent years running the rear palace, pretending to be a eunuch. What was more shocking still was *when* he chose to make his public appearance: on the occasion of the crushing of the Shi clan.

Ever since his days as a "eunuch,"the Moon Prince's beauty had attracted much attention, not just from women but from men as well. The revelation of Jinshi's true identity had caused much consternation among the actual eunuchs of the rear palace; Rikuson had seen it himself. Many wondered whether they ought to retire, or perhaps hang themselves or cut their bellies.

When the Emperor was asked why he had allowed a member of the royal family to pretend to be a eunuch, he'd replied, "To search out corruption." Indeed, the Shi clan, rulers of Shihoku Province, had attempted a rebellion; their destruction was fresh in the memory.

"And what is this love you speak of?" The third daughter was blushing. She seemed to have another meaning of *love* in mind, but no one bothered to point that out. The possibility was indeed implied.

"Have you not heard the stories? About whether the Moon Prince is

really the son of the former emperor?" Gyoku-ou said.

"Yes, but that's all they are—hearsay. Even our father said the Moon Prince was much like the former emperor in the sovereign's younger days. Then who do you propose was the father?" the second son asked, exasperated by the entire topic.

Gyoku-ou's expression never faltered. "At that time, the Empress Dowager was simply the empress. Only so many people could get close to a woman in her position. If it wasn't His Former Majesty, it could only have been a family member." Gyoku-ou grinned—an expression that the people of the western capital might have considered heroic. What he spoke of now, however, was foul. "Say, His Present Majesty."

"You're suggesting that the Moon Prince might be the Emperor's own son?" the fifth brother asked, going pale. Not only the other siblings but their attendants began muttering to each other.

With the many nomadic tribes in I-sei Province, marriage among relatives was common—but relations between a parent and child were taboo.

"Is it so hard to imagine?" asked Gyoku-ou. "The former emperor was interested only in children—and the Empress Dowager was not that young, but still young. Closer in age to our current sovereign than the former one, I daresay. Consanguinity has never stopped the Imperial family before. There are records of past members having children with nieces or half-sisters."

"This is beyond absurd! What you're suggesting is absolutely unthinkable!" Dahai shouted. All his deference toward his eldest brother had evaporated.

"And yet it explains everything. The 'Imperial younger brother' resembles His Majesty? Well, a son resembles his father. His Majesty dotes upon the Moon Prince? So does a father upon his son. Finally, no children were raised in the rear palace for many years—to allow his eldest son to be certain to inherit the throne."

The eldest sister marched up to Gyoku-ou, pressing closer and closer to him. "You mean to say that His Majesty never *intended* for any of his other children to survive to adulthood? That the other infants were murdered, and the Crown Prince will be too? With what proof? What proof do you have?!" Her lady-in-waiting, somewhat reluctantly, held her mistress back.

"She's right! On what grounds can you say this?" the third daughter

demanded. “If it ever came out that you were making such accusations based on nothing but speculation, we would be lucky to meet the fate of the Yi—or even the Shi—clan!”

“You want proof? Then let me tell you a story.” Gyoku-ou, unbothered by the hubbub that had broken out around him, slowly uncrossed and recrossed his legs. “When the Imperial younger brother was born, almost all of the ladies-in-waiting who had attended the empress until that time were released from service. One of them was married off to a man in I-sei Province, and her husband happened to be an acquaintance of mine. Tragically, her husband died, after which she came to me with a request. She said she had something very important to say about the Imperial younger brother.”

Gyoku-ou couldn’t have looked more pleased with himself.

“Is... Is this true?” the eldest sister asked, slowly backing away.

“Oh, it’s true. It was last year. Just after His Majesty’s younger brother had been in the western capital, as it happens.”

Dahai gave Gyoku-ou a doubtful look. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“This is the first I’ve spoken of it. It seemed very strange that she would come to me with her story, but I thought the least I could do was hear her out. Yet almost immediately after that, this former lady-in-waiting died—run over by a carriage in a terrible accident.” He spread his hands mournfully. The implication was clear: he wanted them to believe someone had tried to shut the woman up.

Rikuson felt himself break out in a damp sweat.

This man, Gyoku-ou, had a perfect facade.

He knew how to set the stage.

And he knew how to needle others in their weakest places.

He had no real proof of his claims, yet he would succeed in sowing doubt in the minds of everyone in the room about the circumstances of the Moon Prince’s birth. He talked circles around them and invited them to this conclusion.

“Do you think the Moon Prince would deign to listen to what I have said? Would it be best I not speak of it? Does he know, or does he not know?” Gyoku-ou’s voice rang around the room as he declaimed. His gestures and motions were as studied as an actor’s on the stage, and his tale, which by all rights should have been laughable, fell sweetly on the ear.

“Our father desired and desires the flourishing of the western capital. Is that what we will gain by simply wagging our tails at the Imperial family? If you say we should be their dogs, then *I* say we should have been destroyed seventeen years ago!”

The Yi clan was named after the dog of the zodiac, and Gyoku-ou played on their name now to invoke the memory of their clan. The younger brothers and sisters who had opposed their elder no longer looked so certain. They had begun to wonder if they should meekly support the Imperial family or not.

This, Rikuson saw, was what made Gyoku-ou so frightening. He would make them do that which they did not wish to.

He knew now why he had been called here. It was a provocation: Gyoku-ou did not care if the Imperial younger brother found out about this. That was why he had chosen Rikuson, a hamstrung man. Just as the bat was neither bird nor beast, so Rikuson belonged neither to the royal capital nor the western city.

Gyoku-ou’s tone filled Rikuson’s mind. It challenged him to speak if he dared—and asked what it would matter if he did.

“Now, we must get ready,” Gyoku-ou said. “We cannot let the ceremony conclude without our presence. All of you, go, prepare.”

At Gyoku-ou’s urging, the siblings parted ways, with heavy hearts and long faces.

Finally, only Dahai among them was left. Before he left the room, he turned to look at Gyoku-ou. “Eldest Brother. This ceremony we go to...”

“I’ll mind my manners for today. I know your hearts are not yet settled.”

Rikuson wasn’t sure whether he found that reassuring. He stayed in his chair, stock-still, staring at the ground.

Chapter 19: The Weeping Wind (Part One)

It was all right. All was well, Gyoku-ou kept telling himself. Soon, all would be over. Soon, it would all be taken care of.

He felt as if a thread that had been wound around his feet were soon to be cut. Meanwhile, he was moving to slash the countless threads wound around his neck.

The nightmare that had plagued him for nearly thirty years would be dispelled.

Soon. All very soon.

He picked up a flight feather that sat on the shelf. It came from a hawk his mother had especially adored. When she died, the bird passed soon after, as if following her into the next life. He remembered his distress when she had asked him to take care of the hawk for her. He didn't know how to care for a bird and had never expected to.

"You'll protect this town, won't you?" he remembered his mother saying. She was such a kind woman; she had never resented anyone in her life. His father, Gyokuen, had called her Seibo, the Western Mother, because he had wished to make her the most venerated mother in all of I-sei Province.

She had told Gyoku-ou that his name, which meant Jade Nightingale, came from a bird that lived in the lands far to the east. He wished, though, that she had named him after the eagle instead. A strong name.

"Daddy saves Mommy. Like the hero in a play!"

He wished, then, that he hadn't been named after a weak bird like the nightingale. He wished he had a stronger name.

Just as Gyoku-ou set the feather down, there came a knock at the door.

"Enter," he said.

"Master Gyoku-ou, there's someone who would like an audience with you. Will you receive them?" asked his aide, coming into the room.

Gyoku-ou was in his office in the administrative building, getting changed. The discussion with his siblings had gone long, and he wanted to hurry to the ceremony. He had no time to entertain visitors.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“A man named Takubatsu, from a village to the northwest. What will you do, sir?”

The question meant: Did he want a guard in the room? Gyoku-ou was in a hurry; whatever this was, he wanted it to be over quickly. “Don’t bother with a guard. And I want you out of here too.”

Takubatsu was Gyoku-ou’s milk brother. Takubatsu’s mother had been an enslaved former Windreader. Seibo, out of compassion for a fellow tribe member, had freed the woman from slavery and brought her to her own residence. Takubatsu’s mother had been close to Seibo, and this had led to her becoming Gyoku-ou’s nursemaid. Gyoku-ou remembered his mother and his nurse looking after the bird together.

Gyoku-ou finished changing as the aide showed Takubatsu into the room. “Pardon me,” Takubatsu said and came to stand before Gyoku-ou. He was an unimposing figure, with unruly black hair and pale eyes that betrayed foreign blood in his veins. Gyoku-ou’s nursemaid had had her son before she was freed from slavery—his father had been her owner.

Takubatsu had worked at the main house along with his mother, but when his mother fell ill, he had quit his job. Gyokuen had told the nursemaid she had done well and given her some money, and she and her son had moved to a quiet farming village.

Gyoku-ou and Takubatsu hadn’t had any contact to speak of after that. Takubatsu had probably been occupied acclimating himself to his new surroundings. Gyoku-ou, for his part, was just as happy to have Takubatsu out of the picture—he’d seemed rather too much like an older brother.

According to Seibo, however, after going to the village, Gyoku-ou’s former nursemaid had grown sedentary and senile. After working herself to the bone as a slave, old age seemed to catch up with her quickly.

Takubatsu had come to ask favors of Gyokuen several times when his life grew hard, and Gyokuen gave Takubatsu work. But more and more farmers came to imitate Takubatsu, trying to borrow money from Gyoku-ou’s father. Most of them were also former slaves that his mother had freed. This, Gyoku-ou had always thought, was what it meant to return evil for good. He never ceased to be amazed by his father’s softness.

“What is it? It’s unusual for you to come yourself,” he said now, suppressing his desire to demand why Takubatsu had to come at such a busy moment. Gyokuen wasn’t even in the city.

Takubatsu might have been Gyoku-ou’s milk brother, but it had been

some time since they had seen each other. To be perfectly blunt, Gyoku-ou wanted to hurry up and finish this conversation. He had no wish to even see Takubatsu's face.

"I'm sorry to show up unannounced," Takubatsu said. "But there's something I simply must know."

When *had* they seen each other last? Gyoku-ou had been fifteen when his nursemaid left the estate. Until then, Takubatsu, who was a year older than him, had acted like his older brother.

At the time, Gyoku-ou didn't care, but now it rankled him to no end. Still, he couldn't summon the motivation to shout and bluster. He would handle this like an adult.

"Let's be frank with each other. I happen to be busy. I have a state ceremony to attend in a few minutes," Gyoku-ou said.

"Then in the spirit of frankness, I'll simply ask: Do you mean to go to war with Shaoh?" Takubatsu glared at him.

"If that turns out to be the only option, then yes. We have to," Gyoku-ou replied, adjusting his collar as he spoke.

"But you're the one who put us in that position! Why? Tell me that! You always used to say that you wanted to be just like Master Gyokuen—to go to other places, build relationships with other people, help the business thrive. You wanted to help the western capital become great! You have children, grandchildren. You want to put your family in danger? Because that's what you'll be doing if you start a war!"

Takubatsu was shouting. Gyoku-ou's milk brother. He'd always looked so large to Gyoku-ou—but now he seemed small and shabby. His mother's decline had left him unable to get a decent job, which left him poor, and so he had come to Gyoku-ou's father to wheedle and beg. Gyoku-ou had thought perhaps he'd come today to do it again, but no. This was what he wanted to talk about?

"Yes, I did—but as you say, that was the past. And also as you say, my first duty must be to protect my family."

Takubatsu was talking about the halcyon days of Gyoku-ou's youth, when the sky was always blue and no doubt had troubled him.

"As you can see, the western capital is in danger. The people are exhausted by the ravages of the insect swarm. If I am to supply what they lack, some sacrifice must be made, must it not?"

"It's our leaders' job to avoid precisely such sacrifices! If Master Gyokuen were here, he would be searching for some other way—any other

way. Have *you* searched? Even the honored Imperial younger brother has done his part!"

Gyoku-ou found Takubatsu's voice grating. The man had colicky hair and pale eyes. Signs of foreign blood. There was nothing about Takubatsu that Gyoku-ou liked—not the way he looked, not the way he acted.

"That is not your concern. I told you, I have business to attend to. I'm going to be part of a state ceremony. I'm out of time to entertain you."

"A state ceremony where you'll whip the people into a war frenzy, no doubt. It was always one of your greatest talents—give you a stage, and you could sway any audience. Just as our younger brothers and sisters looked shaken earlier."

"Shut up!" Gyoku-ou bellowed in spite of himself. He had to be careful. The bureaucrats had left the two of them alone, but they might come in if they heard shouting. He couldn't have that.

"Of course it's my concern. I'm your older brother."

Gyoku-ou regarded Takubatsu with an absolute chill in his eyes.

He couldn't have his aides hearing talk like that. No one could.

"I don't know what you mean," he said. "Milk brothers we may be, yes. If you want to go around playing at being the elder, I can smile and play along. But you are *not* my older brother."

"I know you wish I weren't," Takubatsu said slowly. "Master Gyokuen and Lady Seibo both raised you that way. And I'm sure my own mother agreed with them."

Takubatsu threw a book on the table, a weathered lump of sheepskin parchment. It was a family register. Obviously quite an old one—decades old, perhaps. Gyoku-ou's milk brother began flipping the pages.

"Too bad for you it's all written right here."

Seibo's name was there. Listed as her child was a name Gyoku-ou didn't recognize. They had been born, however, in the same year as Gyoku-ou.

"The story was that my mother left Master Gyokuen's household because she was sick. But it was only a cover. Master Gyokuen put us out of his house in order to hide me and my mother." The words came easily now, smoothly. "I'm told I was the son of a Shaohnese merchant. The man lost his children to sickness and accidents, one after another, and when his family was all gone, he recalled a child he'd had with a forgotten slave."

Gyoku-ou was silent. He had a ceremony to get to, but he couldn't leave this man alone while he was taking his little trip down memory lane.

“Eventually that merchant found his way to Master Gyokuen, didn’t he? Did you think nothing when you saw him?”

Gyoku-ou didn’t answer. It had been a few days after Takubatsu and his mother had left. A foreign man Gyoku-ou had never seen before came to the mansion and had taken Gyoku-ou by the shoulders. He spoke in rapid Shaohnese; Gyoku-ou had some trouble following him, but he could tell the man was exclaiming, “My son! My son!”

This foreign man had red hair and pale-green eyes. His eye color much resembled Takubatsu’s, as did his unruly hair. But his facial features and his sturdy build were the spitting image of an older Gyoku-ou.

The foreigner had mistaken Gyoku-ou for Takubatsu. Before Gyoku-ou could push the man away, Seibo was between them. She hugged Gyoku-ou close and gave the foreign man a fearful look.

Gyoku-ou had heard that his mother was a former Windreader. He’d heard that she had left her life on the plains to join his father in doing business—and that she freed former members of the tribe who had been enslaved.

But that was wrong. Those steps were out of order.

It was Gyokuen who had freed the Windreader slaves, including Seibo and Gyoku-ou’s nurse mother. Then, Seibo had become Gyokuen’s wife and begun doing business with him.

As slaves, she and the nursemaid had been owned by the same man. When Gyokuen had taken her in, Seibo had already been with child by a foreign father. The foreigner, never knowing this, sold his slave, Seibo, to Gyokuen.

“You and I, Gyoku-ou, are sons of the same father,” Takubatsu said. He sounded so calm, when Gyoku-ou didn’t want to hear this—but even plugging his ears would not be enough to block out the truth. “My mother told me everything. I’m sure she meant to take the secret to her grave, if she hadn’t gone senile. I’m sure she never meant to speak of your true father. I believe she truly was overjoyed by Master Gyokuen and Lady Seibo’s marriage.”

Takubatsu’s mother had revealed how Gyokuen and Seibo had known each other all along, and indeed had been engaged to be married. Then another tribe had attacked, and Seibo and Gyoku-ou’s milk mother had been sold into slavery. Their master had helped himself to his slaves, the nursemaid giving birth to Takubatsu and Seibo becoming pregnant with Gyoku-ou. Gyokuen had bought the slaves, giving them decent work and a

place to live. Gyokuen had sought Seibo's hand in marriage, but she refused him, on the grounds that she was already pregnant.

"This is your true name," Takubatsu said.

In order to take up residence in I-sei Province, it was necessary to establish a family register, which would be kept at the administrative office in the western capital, overseen by the Yi clan.

Gyokuen promised Seibo that even if the child was not his by blood, he would raise it as if it were. She gave in, and the boy was renamed Gyoku-ou.

It was then that the nursemaid began working in Gyokuen's household, and Takubatsu became Gyoku-ou's milk brother.

Gyoku-ou had been so young that he didn't remember any of this.

He clawed at his knees under the table. He knew. He knew all of it. He didn't need Takubatsu to tell him—Gyoku-ou knew the truth. And still, he had to be Gyokuen's eldest son.

Righteousness was with his father. Justice in the form of protecting the western capital. It was what Seibo had wanted. To accomplish it, Gyokuen's eldest son, Gyoku-ou, had to be perfect.

The evil necessary to attain Gyokuen's justice? Compared to other leaders, it was hardly evil at all. Gyoku-ou's father was simply that good a man.

Gyoku-ou remembered how the former slaves failed at the unfamiliar practice of farming, again and again, and came to his father for money. Gyokuen, ever kind, lent it to them. What they couldn't repay, he allowed them to pay off by working in his fields at the harvest. It was as gentle a loan as had ever been offered. In fact, considering the time and effort necessary to teach them, the borrowers came out ahead. Yet in spite of this, Gyoku-ou's father was never greedy. Perhaps a man with deep pockets could simply, literally afford to help others like this.

Even then, there were limits to what could be permitted. They were broken by the first slaves Gyokuen had freed. People who knew about Gyoku-ou's origins.

As they say, the quiet pheasant is not shot.

Gyokuen truly loved Gyoku-ou. Those audacious enough to try to threaten him disappeared one by one. Be they former slaves, or be they members of the Windreader tribe who knew Seibo, they vanished. They had to. The Jade must remain unblemished.

If Gyoku-ou was to succeed his father, then anyone who stood in the

way must be eliminated.

"Where exactly did you get this register?"

"Big Lin had it hidden. I got it from him."

Takubatsu seemed to be talking about something that had stirred up the household some time ago. Even Gyoku-ou had heard about it.

"The so-called Small Lin, the one who disappeared—that was you? That means you've been working on this for a while. But why?"

After a moment, Takubatsu said, "Master Gyokuen asked me to. He said that if Big Lin seemed to be hiding any papers from long ago, to let him know. He told me to burn anything I found. That was why he periodically called me here."

Now it all made sense. "I see," Gyoku-ou said.

Gyokuen had, as ever, had his son's interests at heart. He'd given Gyoku-ou hell for what he'd done to the Yi clan those seventeen years ago, but even then he hadn't disinherited him. Gyoku-ou worked on Gyokuen's behalf. So that the people would venerate him, so that charity could be given to the weak, so that everyone would see him as a hero upon whom they could rely.

Gyoku-ou knew his father would forgive what he did. For Gyoku-ou, who would take over from his father, was the perfect politician, unblemished, always thinking of what would help the western capital thrive.

That was how he knew that what he was doing now was right.

"If you really care about the western capital, please, stop this nonsense about attacking other countries," Takubatsu said. "If you won't..."

He took a knife from the folds of his robe.

Gyoku-ou didn't so much as take a step back. However, he couldn't spend any more time on this matter. He forced his coursing blood to cool and let out a great sigh. "Very well," he said. "I won't do anything."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes. But only let me go to this ceremony. If I don't appear, the mood will go sour. I don't want to damage the Imperial younger brother's reputation."

"Yes... Very well. But I'm going to keep this family register close. I fully intend to raise the matter with Master Gyokuen."

With that, Takubatsu put the knife on the table and picked up the register instead. Gyoku-ou trusted that he wouldn't tell anyone what he knew.

“I want you to know one thing, Takubatsu. For the western capital, for I-sei Province, there is nothing I won’t do.”

“I know that. You always told me how much you wanted to be a great man like Master Gyokuen.” Takubatsu actually smiled.

“Exactly.”

“To you, he is a noble father—and I, too, see him as a father I can respect more than anyone else.”

Gyoku-ou didn’t speak, but at that, a thread snapped within him. He’d meant to remain calm at this moment no matter what happened. But it was bad enough for Takubatsu to call Gyoku-ou his younger brother. Now he called Gyokuen his father.

Gyoku-ou *had* to be Gyokuen’s eldest son. Had to be his pride, the leader of the western capital...

“Hrngh!” Takubatsu exclaimed.

Before Gyoku-ou knew what had happened, he realized there was a knife in his right hand and a sheathe in his left. Something slick ran along his palm.

“Wh... Why?” Takubatsu’s eyes were wide, and bloody foam dribbled from the corner of his mouth. His blood poured down the table and onto the floor; the family register he’d been holding dropped from his hands and into the red pool.

“Because you’re in my way.”

With the knife still lodged in Takubatsu, Gyoku-ou’s mind turned to the events of the past.

How he’d wished to be like his father, longed for his father to validate him.

Gyokuen loomed so large in his mind. Gyoku-ou had grown large too—but it wasn’t the same.

At first, he hadn’t much minded.

Gyokuen and Seibo had handled business together, and the family had been surrounded by servants. Gyokuen was a brilliant businessman, and Seibo was every bit as sharp as him. A hugely capable woman, she would find out what he needed, and then she would act to get it.

Gyoku-ou had wanted for nothing in his upbringing. Only, when he was five years old, another woman and her daughter came to live with them.

Gyokuen fawned over to the new child—a little sister to Gyoku-ou, still just two years old. Seibo was nearly as smitten as her husband. The new

woman was also kind to Gyoku-ou.

Two years after that, a third woman arrived, bringing a little brother.

Then there was a fourth and a fifth...

The family got bigger and bigger. Each time it did, Gyoku-ou worried. To him, it felt like a jar full of honey being gradually diluted with water.

Gyokuen always picked intelligent women. One was a master of horsemanship, another skilled in arithmetic. Each of them passed on their particular talents to their offspring. The women supported Gyoku-ou's father, and their children in turn helped them.

Through the bonds of family, the newly arrived You household became great in the western capital. At the same time, Gyoku-ou felt the bond joining him to Gyokuen weakening.

Yet it proved otherwise. Gyokuen chose Gyoku-ou for his successor. Seibo was still Gyokuen's official wife; the other women were only consorts. Surely, it was only Gyoku-ou who could rule the western capital as Gyokuen had. Not his younger brothers or sisters.

Even after he discovered that he was not Gyokuen's real son, Gyoku-ou maintained his equanimity. So what if they weren't connected by blood? Gyokuen valued Gyoku-ou most of all. He couldn't have cared more for him if he'd been his own flesh and blood.

So it was that Gyoku-ou was able to be kind and gentle to his younger siblings. Tolerant of them. Gyoku-ou alone was like a cuckoo's chick, a different creature from his brothers and sisters, but so long as his father treated him as his eldest son, Gyoku-ou meant to play the part of the elder brother to the hilt.

The very last mother and child that Gyokuen welcomed into his house, however, Gyoku-ou could not tolerate. They had red hair and pale-green eyes—just like the master who had tormented Seibo when she was a slave.

Bit by bit the curses overflowed, the way ink might stain a piece of parchment.

The patter of blood dripping to the floor brought Gyoku-ou back to reality.

"...oku...o..." Takubatsu looked at him with bloodshot eyes and said something, his voice a whisper, but Gyoku-ou couldn't hear it.

Gyoku-ou flipped the knife around in his hand and gutted Takubatsu.

Unable to speak anymore, he only glared at Gyoku-ou with baleful eyes.

"One final mercy for a *milk* brother," Gyoku-ou said, and then he

pulled the knife out before driving it past Takubatsu's ribs and into his heart. Takubatsu groaned, twitched, and died.

The knife had belonged to Takubatsu. He'd tried to attack Gyoku-ou, only to meet his end by his own weapon. Yes, that would do for a scenario.

Gyoku-ou picked up the family register, wrapped it in a cloth, and placed it in a drawer.

He was right—someone had heard the shouting. There was a rush of footsteps that stopped outside the door, followed by a knock.

"Master Gyoku-ou? Is everything all right?" a voice asked.

"Come in," he said.

"M—Master Gyoku-ou?!"

It wasn't his aide who entered, but Rikuson. He'd been at the conference with them—he must have come to check on Gyoku-ou when he was running late.

"What in the world happened here?" Rikuson asked, maintaining an air of calm despite his obvious shock. This was the man that Gyoku-ou's father had sent him from the royal capital to be his adjutant. He knew enough not to immediately make a scene.

"You're telling me you can't guess?" Gyoku-ou asked.

"This man... He's the one who sought an audience with you a few minutes ago, isn't he?"

Rikuson must have seen Takubatsu when he spoke to the aide.

"That's right. He was my milk brother, in fact, so I indulged him. He came to beg for money, but when he saw he couldn't wheedle anything out of me, he became enraged." Gyoku-ou showed him Takubatsu's knife.

"You did this, sir?"

"Yes. What, you think the likes of him could overpower me?"

Gyoku-ou's face was still twitching. Takubatsu had brought this upon himself. Talking as if he and not Gyoku-ou were Gyokuen's eldest son.

Gyoku-ou placed the knife on the table. He would have to change quickly and get some perfume to cover the smell of blood.

"Not at all, Master Gyoku-ou. Your strength he could not best." Rikuson knelt down and looked at Takubatsu's body. Inspecting the wounds, it seemed like.

"I didn't want to do it, but he left me no choice. I wanted to settle things amicably. I have a ceremony to attend. But he tried to stand in my way. Good riddance to him."

Rikuson's gaze was empty as it drifted from Takubatsu to Gyoku-ou

and back. “Yes... Of course.”

Then, for a second, Gyoku-ou lost sight of Rikuson. He turned—where had he gone?—to find the other man right next to him.

“Here’s what I’ll tell everyone,” Rikuson said, and his expression was cold, except for a glint of flame deep in his eyes. What was this? “Master Gyoku-ou was attacked by a traitor...”

Suddenly, Gyoku-ou felt very warm.

“...and he met his end.”

What did that mean? Gyoku-ou was still trying to understand when he collapsed.

He found himself face-to-face with Takubatsu. There was blood all over the floor; he could hear it flowing out.

“I arrived too late to save him, but I was able to stop the traitor,” Rikuson said.

What did that mean? What was he talking about? Gyoku-ou didn’t understand. He opened his mouth to say something but found he couldn’t speak. There was a bloody foam at the corner of his mouth.

He gasped. Still no voice came out, but only a groan, like the warbling of a bird.

“Don’t make that face. Don’t pretend you don’t know why. You’ll be able to be the star.” Rikuson’s face was expressionless, but there were tears in his eyes. “The hero of a tragedy.” The tears ran down his cheeks and fell to the floor.

He couldn’t do anything—not like this. He couldn’t do anything for the western capital.

He couldn’t rule the city as his father’s son.

He couldn’t go to Shaoh and rescue the slaves, as his father had done.

He’d planned to punish the man who had put his mother through hell.

Gyoku-ou was Gyokuen’s eldest son. He wouldn’t let anyone usurp that place from him.

All he had to do was erase every last shred of evidence that Gyokuen wasn’t his father.

There was nothing he wouldn’t do to achieve that.

Even if it meant bringing down the Yi clan, which had sullied its hands with wrongdoing for the benefit of the western capital.

One day, one day when it was all gone, he was going to rule secure in Gyokuen’s place...

The clatter of a carriage, the neighing of the horses, the creak of the wheels, the shouting of the driver.

The sounds of the marketplace, the shouts of the merchants, the burble of the crowd, the laughter of children.

The dry air and exhausted earth. Though the land had scant blessings, people here lived bravely and well. He was going to make them more prosperous, richer.

Not anymore.

And so it was only then that Gyoku-ou realized something.

It was strange. Wrong.

Why, when he was meant to inherit the leadership of the western capital in Gyokuen's place? Why, when it fell to him to help the city grow?

Why, with all that being true, would he put the western capital in danger?

He felt the threads that had bound him for so many years unraveling one by one.

Threads that had held him for decades snapped and gave way, and he was free.

Gyoku-ou's life scattered like a string of jade beads, and the man who had cut it was right there before his eyes, on his face a mixture of hatred and pity.

Who are you?

That was the last thought Gyoku-ou had.

He would think no more, do no more.

He would not make the western capital flourish as his father had.

He had sought to be a hero, but his life ended in utter anticlimax.

Chapter 20: The Weeping Wind (Part Two)

His mother had often said to him, “When you grow up, you’ll become the wind.”

When he came of age at fifteen, he would go out into the world—but until then, she told him, he must study all that the world had to offer. Two more years of this learning lay ahead of him...

Become the wind, she told him, and blow so that the air of the western reaches might stay clear.

It was a memory from the time before Rikuson was called Rikuson.

The women protected the town while the men roamed across the plains: this was what he had been taught. He was sad to know he would have to leave home someday, but if he could become the wind, if he could be of help to his mother and his older sister, then he was glad of that.

He enjoyed his afternoon walks, trying to decide how he could best use the pocket change they gave him, how to get something good for it and not waste it. What should he spend it on that would be satisfying? That was its own kind of study. Many of his male relatives who went out on their own became merchants, and Rikuson expected that was the path he, too, would choose.

He went from shop to shop, comparing flavors and prices and quantities, until he found the best dried fruit or goat’s milk and bought it. Then, he would go to the Shogi hall.

It was full of adults with time to kill jawing with each other—and there was much information to be had there. Rikuson might be able to hear even more talk at the tavern, but he wasn’t yet of age and they wouldn’t let him in.

There were plenty of drunks at the Shogi hall too—but once in a while you could run into a true master.

“Oh, hey there, kiddo. Back again?” asked an old man sitting at a Shogi board. He was a former secretary at the administrative building. He was mostly retired now, but he was collecting materials for some sort of new history he was compiling. He was the best Shogi player in the western

capital. Everyone called him Big Lin.

"Uh-huh." Rikuson seated himself beside Big Lin and studied the board. Sticking close to him would keep the nastier drunks away.

Then Rikuson tilted his head. "Huh?" Big Lin was losing this game. You didn't see that often. Rikuson looked at his opponent and saw a man still more or less in the bloom of youth, but ragged, filthy. His face bore a fine stubble, his clothes were grimy, and his hair was barely tied in place. His outfit was nice enough, but it seemed his circumstances weren't. He looked feeble, and had no tan; he didn't seem to be a resident of the western capital. But his eyes—his eyes glinted like those of a fox.

"I see you have a little Pawn with you," the man said—a Shogi piece. He wore a monocle over one of his fox-like eyes, an imported piece, but on this guy everything looked crude instead of fancy.

What did he mean by that? He seemed to be talking about Rikuson. He bristled at the expression, his hands balling into fists. "Who are you calling a Pawn?" he demanded.

"Don't get upset, kid. Lakan's just that kind of creature," Big Lin said calmly.

"But he called me a Pawn!"

"What's wrong with that? Most people, he just calls 'em Go stones."

"Go stones..."

Rikuson wasn't sure what the difference was between a Go stone and a Pawn. He looked at the board as he pondered the question. This "Lakan" might look suspicious and might mock everyone he met—but he backed it up by being a tremendous Shogi player. This was the first time Rikuson had ever seen Big Lin losing a game. Even if Big Lin wasn't quite the player he had been in his youth, at the peak of his powers, people still called him the Shogi sage; it almost didn't seem possible that he could lose. But this visitor seemed to be holding him to fifty-fifty in their games.

Curious, Rikuson came back the next day, and the day after that. Lakan was always there. (Did he even have a job?) When he wasn't at the Shogi hall, Rikuson found out, he was at the Go hall. All he did was play games.

One day, Big Lin wasn't there; Lakan was playing with some other people, but he looked awfully bored by it.

"It's him again," someone said. "The Yi boy!"

No one would have dared to say such a thing in the presence of Big Lin, but they felt no need to restrain themselves when Rikuson was alone.

Yi boy. A child of the Yi clan; that was what they were calling him. The

Yi clan ruled the western capital, but there were many who resented their unique system of inheritance and were all too ready to speak ill of them.

Generation to generation, the Yi clan was ruled by women; any boys who were born left their homes when they came of age. Yi women did not have husbands, and didn't know who the fathers of their children were. Like animals, some sneered.

Rikuson knew that such contempt was to be expected. Many members of the nomadic tribes passed through the western capital, and those tribes had always had a strong patriarchal bent. They even denigrated children of unknown fathers as "Yi spawn."

For all that, Rikuson still felt the pride of knowing that the Yi had protected these western reaches for centuries.

Without Big Lin there, he did the next best thing and sat down beside Lakan. They'd met several times now, but the other man had made no effort to remember Rikuson. In fact, he made no effort to remember anybody. He just sat in front of his Shogi board; if someone put a few coins on the table, he would play. That was it. The most he might do is compare someone to a Shogi piece based on whether they were weak or strong, or perhaps by some other standard.

"Mister, don't you remember faces?"

"I don't get people's faces," Lakan said. He might be a grown-up, but he didn't talk like one.

"What's to get? You see them a few times, you remember them, right?"

"I only see Go stones. Or Shogi pieces if I'm lucky."

This made no sense to Rikuson, but he didn't think Lakan was lying. Distinguishing people's faces was probably no easier for him than telling livestock apart was for most people. Among the nomadic tribes, it was said that some herdsmen could distinguish each and every one of their sheep—but Rikuson could never do that. Maybe Lakan saw people's faces the same way Rikuson saw sheep.

"Well, what do you do when you *really* need to remember who someone is?"

Lakan was silent for a moment. As he mulled over Rikuson's question, he continued a merciless game of Shogi. His opponent blanched, acknowledged he was defeated, and put some coins on the table. Maybe Lakan was supporting himself by wagering on Shogi games?

Finally he said, "I remember them by the shape of their ears, or their height. I look at the quality of their hair. Memorize the stink of their sweat.

Or I listen for the pitch of their voice...”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just remember their face?”

“I don’t get faces. I can see people have eyes and a nose and a mouth, but when I try to put them together, they get all tangled up and all I can see is a Go stone. Now, the size of a person’s nostrils, the length of their eyelashes—those, I can understand.”

So he didn’t remember an entire face, just specific details about it. That sounded exhausting. No wonder he only did it for the most important people.

“Did you come from the central region, mister?” Rikuson asked.

“Yeah, and one of these days I’ll go back. I’ve got to.” Lakan casually smashed his next opponent as he spoke.

“The central region,” Rikuson murmured. His mother had told him to become the wind and blow on his way, but would she approve of him going as far as the royal capital? If wind he was to be, he wanted to travel as far as wind might.

“Mister,” he said. “If I become big and famous in the central region, will you give me a job?”

“Hrm? You move up from being a Pawn, sure.”

“All right. It’s a deal.”

His sister had taught him that it was always a good thing to make connections. Rikuson didn’t know if he would become a merchant or not, but it couldn’t hurt to get to know everyone he could.

In the evenings, the whole clan ate together. Rikuson was surrounded by women. The bloodline produced a lot of them to begin with, and since the only other boy had come of age last year, Rikuson was the only male child left.

There were three little girls, though, sisters born in successive years. Cousins of Rikuson. They looked much alike—the same father, perhaps. They were three, four, and five years old, and while the oldest had proved quite smart, the younger two couldn’t really talk yet, and Rikuson often found himself obliged to look after them.

His older sister was already past the age of adulthood and was accepted among the grown-ups.

He listened to the adults talk as he fed his cousins. They spoke of food provisions, imported goods, and Li’s exports.

Rikuson’s mother was a central figure in the clan. Her younger sister,

Rikuson's aunt, was the current ruler of the Yi; she had not borne any daughters, and as things stood it was Rikuson's older sister, well qualified by age and ability, who was next in line to lead. So people went out of their way to include Rikuson's sister in their discussions.

From what he overheard, Rikuson gathered that foreign trade was in a bad place right now. They had been in the red for years, to the point that the central region was giving them a hard time about it. Long ago, they had produced copious quantities of high-quality paper, but these days there was only inferior stuff to be had. Paper, light and convenient to transport, had been a major product for them, and Rikuson's mother and the others struggled to find a replacement for it.

Worse, there had been an insect plague in I-sei Province. The increased farmlands, themselves the natural result of the western capital's burgeoning population, were to blame. All the royal capital could see was the harvest numbers, and since those remained high, they refused to send any support. But the extra people meant even less food to go around.

"We should bring out the black stone," his aunt said. His mother, and his sister, and his mother's older sister, and all the women of the clan could only nod their assent.

Rikuson did not know what the black stone was; he just continued feeding bread to his three-year-old cousin.

In the evenings, his sister and mother would teach him the history of I-sei Province.

When the nation of Li was founded, they said, the three children from the belly of Wang Mu, the Mother Royal, became the leaders of the three provinces.

At first the Yi clan, which ruled the west, struggled terribly. In this land, the tendency to put men ahead of women was especially strong. People mocked the Yi because their progenitor was a woman; people took advantage of them and at one point it seemed the clan might fall apart. Sycophants tried to steal their name with flattery, while others sought to do it through force.

So, in order that their clan might not be seized from within, they adopted a matriarchal system. They did not bring husbands into their houses. All their successors were women.

Special roles emerged for men of the Yi clan. One of them was to become the wind. The wind—or again, hearers of things.

They went here and there in I-sei Province, gathering information. As merchants, as nomads. Those who became nomads later came to be known as the Windreader tribe, and could employ birds and keep the bugs at bay.

Only, there had been a miscalculation. The Windreader tribe had been destroyed decades ago.

There had been several Windreader tribes, and one of them ceased their regular communication with the Yi. For years, decades, then centuries, they maintained their separation from the clan. The Yi would occasionally send a boy to try to strengthen the bonds of blood, but there were no guarantees that the tribe would swear allegiance to a former clan leader indefinitely. Eventually, there appeared some who sought to profit by communicating with other countries.

Then came the attack. The Windreader tribe that was no longer communicating with the Yi was tragically annihilated by another tribe. Some idiot had decided that the ability to control birds must be passed down by blood and had kidnapped one of their women, trying to gain the power for himself. Then, in order that he would have a monopoly on the power, he killed the others and sold any survivors into slavery.

The Yi could not abide the Windreaders who had spurned to communicate with them. They broke up the remaining Windreaders as well, sending those with any useful abilities to live in town. Once in a while, Rikuson understood, they also quietly disposed of anyone who would misuse the tribe's avian practices.

If the Windreader tribe had continued to exist, another choice would have been open to Rikuson. He could have wandered the plains as one of their members.

Rikuson's mother and sister never did teach him how to handle the birds, but they taught him how to ward off the insects, and told him about how things worked in the farming villages that continued to dot the area. If another plague broke out, the Yi men who lived around the province would be better prepared than anyone.

One of the men who had left the Yi clan often visited Rikuson's house. He was a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man with a gentle smile. His name was Gyokuen. In the western capital, he was sometimes called "the new You."

He had a full, kindly face, and he often gave Rikuson candy.

"He looks like a very intelligent boy. Might I take him as my son?" he

asked Rikuson's mother.

"Please. You're joking," she replied. "People already laugh at you, say you have too many wives. You old womanizer."

"Ahh, so long as I can keep my wives and children in style, there's no problem."

Rikuson found he was surprised by this revelation: for all his modest looks, Gyokuen loved women.

Gyokuen was an important merchant in the western capital. He had begun producing textiles and pottery to export instead of paper, and controlled the importation of glassware. He began making grape wine in I-sei Province and sold it alongside the foreign kind. Some people with highly cultivated tastes preferred the imported wine, but there was also a market for the much cheaper, less acidic local variety.

"And there you have it. I'm going to be taking a visit to Shaoh to do some buying, in order to support my wife and children."

"Well, well. Can the household survive with its master gone for so long?"

"My children are now mostly grown. My eldest has a wife and child of his own. Anyway, so long as my quick-witted wife is around, everything will be taken care of."

"I've heard about your oldest son. They say he's *very* capable."

"Ah, yes. He's an excellent worker. But I do have some misgivings about him."

"Like what?"

"He's set on helping the western capital flourish, and I applaud that, but at the same time he has...an exclusionary bent. He hates foreigners." Gyokuen's normally composed face darkened.

"This eldest son of yours, he's Seibo's child, isn't he? Surely you don't need to worry about *her* boy?"

"Seibo? Only my family uses that name, and only in private. How do you know it?"

"Hah. People talk, you know. They say the 'new Mister You' has many concubines, but treasures his true wife most of all. Rumor is that he disregards the western chieftain and calls his wife Seibo, 'the western mother.'"

Rikuson's mother grinned at Gyokuen, who couldn't help but smile in response. "It seems you've got me there," he said. "But enough about my family. There's something more important afoot. Have I heard correctly

that you've begun giving out the black stone?"

There was that phrase again, Rikuson thought.

"Yes. The poor harvest, you know—no other choice. I think you've got a bit of a hand in that particular trade yourself," Rikuson's mother said. His older sister listened silently. Rikuson seemed to be the only one who didn't know what they were talking about.

"Yes, but I'm doing it on the up-and-up. If you're having trouble, I should be able to give you at least some support."

Rikuson's mother and sister both looked grave.

"It's time for you to go to sleep," his sister said, trying to shoo him out of the room.

"But I'm not tired," said Rikuson.

"It's late enough. Time for bed."

She chased him into the bedroom next door. Frustrated, Rikuson pretended to go to sleep, but soon he had his ear pressed to the wall, listening.

"And what would we have to do to earn your support?" He heard his mother's voice, slightly muffled by the wall.

"Please. You make me sound uncharitable."

"Yi men are raised to give nothing away as merchants. And you *are* an Yi man, aren't you, Gyokuen?"

"Got me again." After a brief pause, he said, "I want you to let me borrow the family register."

The family register. That was a record of where the people in I-sei Province had come from and when they had arrived. There were those without a register, but if they wanted to do business in the western capital, they would have to make one—have to prove who and what they were.

"Absolutely not. That's an official document. If you want to 'borrow' it, I can only assume you want to change something. That would explain why you're talking to me and not the chieftain."

"You won't budge on this?" Gyokuen asked.

"No. Anyway, the family register is already on loan—to Big Lin, as reference material."

"Oh..." Gyokuen sounded disappointed.

"Why would you want to change the family register, anyway?"

"It's about that eldest child of mine."

"Your son?"

"Yes. Gyoku-ou. The register contains the honest truth about his

origins. I think he hates foreigners because he realized where he comes from."

Rikuson continued to eavesdrop, although he was somewhat lost by this conversation.

"There's no end of former Windreaders who come to make demands of me on my wife's account. My business has grown considerably. Imagine what people would say if my own successor had no blood connection to me. If you believe that the western capital needs the 'new You' family, then please, help me."

Although he couldn't see him, Rikuson could almost picture the distress on Gyokuen's face.

"Your first wife, Seibo... She came from the Windreaders herself, didn't she?" Rikuson's mother asked.

"Yes, that's right. From the traitor tribe of Windreaders that I was supposed to join. I should have been her husband there. Should have deepened and strengthened our ties."

This was the Windreader tribe that had been destroyed so long ago.

"Yes, my wife was from the tribe that betrayed us. But it was the adults who committed that treachery. The children knew nothing of it. Whenever I saw her after that, she always looked just as she had those years ago. We did see each other a number of times, you know."

Rikuson wanted to hear more, but he sensed his sister coming over to the bedroom and quickly dived into bed.

"Sister... What is the black stone?" he asked, trying to sound sleepy.

"It's not something you need to know about yet," she said.

"But you told me... You told me to study. That I shouldn't be ignorant."

His sister paused, then said, "The black stone is coal. A rock that burns. We have to dig and dig and dig in the western mountains for it."

"What makes it...so special?"

"When there's a bad harvest, many families barely have enough to eat and can't buy fuel, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"We give it to those families."

"Huh..."

That didn't sound like such a bad thing.

"But it's hard to dig up the stone, right?" Rikuson asked.

"Yes, very hard. We use slaves."

"'Slaves'?"

His sister didn't look very happy about it. "We don't want to, but we do. The more they mine, the quicker they're freed. I've heard that the quickest workers get out in five years."

"What about the slowest?"

"Decades. Some of them used to be Windreaders, you know."

"And them... You won't let them go?"

His sister shook her head. "They betrayed us. Your late grandmother happened to find them as slaves and heard the story. They said they'd planned to take the secret of how to use the birds and go to another country with it. They said it was foolish, having women rulers and making the men leave. Over such a long time as nomads, I guess they started to think that other lands were right to put men ahead of women."

"And that's why Grandma sent them to the mine?"

"Yes. She thought that if they dug well, she could free them. She bought several more former Windreader slaves. But those people said they'd been tricked. Apparently they thought Grandmother would free them even if they sat around doing nothing. Gyokuen, he's too soft on people. He frees slaves as soon as he buys them."

Rikuson's sister seemed to see this as a problem. Rikuson wanted to ask more questions, about Gyokuen and his wife and his eldest son, but he refrained. It would be too obvious that he had been eavesdropping.

"But if the slaves work hard in the mine, eventually they can be free and leave, right?" he asked.

"Yes, but it's dangerous work. The ones who have been there for decades, maybe that shows they aren't doing anything. Maybe they think we're the ones who are evil and wrong."

They, she added, *must hate us.*

They must hate us.

At whom had his sister's words been directed?

He didn't know. He did know, however, that the Yi clan was held in contempt by a great many.

There was a commotion that day, starting first thing in the morning. People surrounded the mansion; they seemed to be voicing some kind of complaint. Rikuson held his terrified cousins and tried to comfort them, but he didn't know what was happening any more than they did.

"Elder Sister, what is this? What's all the noise outside?" he asked.

"It's nothing. Everything is fine," she said. But it clearly wasn't. Her face was bloodless, pale.

Their mother came and spoke to his cousins' mother. A different aunt from the one who led the clan, the cousins' mother was the youngest sister of Rikuson's mother, well separated in years.

"Go out the back. Take the children with you," Rikuson's mother said. *The children* included him. "The house of Gyokuen's newest wife—the new You family, you know them—isn't far. I'm sure you remember her. The former dancing girl? Her children are almost the same age as yours. You're close with her."

"B-But—"

"No buts! Take them and go!" Rikuson's mother said, her tone commanding. She all but chased her sister out of the house, and Rikuson along with her.

His mother and his other aunt, the leader of the clan, went out front. They stood there talking to the mob, which looked like it was at a breaking point. Rikuson understood that they were buying time.

"Let's go, while we have the chance."

Rikuson, his aunt, and his cousins slipped out the back of the house. When they went to the house of Gyokuen's newest wife, they found a woman with red hair and green eyes. When she saw Rikuson and the others, she gestured them around to a back entrance.

"Wh-What in the world is going on?" the cousins' mother asked. Unlike Rikuson's mother and other aunt, she was an easygoing woman, and was rarely included in the household discussions on even terms with his mother and the others. She didn't fully grasp what was happening.

"They're saying the Yi clan has been dishonest—and that it's been reported to the central government!" The red-haired woman looked down as she spoke, her eyes shaded by long eyelashes.

"Dishonest?" Rikuson's aunt asked.

"Yes... They say they've been lying about the amount of coal we mined."

"The black stone? *Now* they have a problem?" his aunt said, incensed. She sounded like she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"It gets worse," the red-haired woman said.

"Worse?"

"They say the clan is making claims beyond its station—that it claims to have within the clan a man descended from the Imperial lineage, and that they Yi say this makes *them* the rightful heirs to the throne. And so an Imperial edict was issued...for the destruction of the traitors who would

usurp the Imperial family."

"No... That's not possible."

Rikuson's aunt and the red-haired woman glanced at him.

"Surely the charges are false," the woman said.

"Of course they are!"

"But who *is* the father?"

"W-Well..."

The Yi clan had a custom of not being explicit about who a child's father was. This had been the way of their clan ever since, one time, a man had appeared claiming to be the father of the chieftain's child in a bid to take over the clan. Even Rikuson didn't know who his father was.

"It's true that my sister went to the royal capital sometime before the boy was born, but the times don't match up. He can't be an Imperial child, and we certainly can't insist that the father identify himself!"

His aunt was right: the Yi clan would never force a father to come forward and identify himself. Rikuson had relatives who were suspected of being the children of actors or foreign dignitaries, but no one said anything publicly. That was how the women of the Yi clan did politics.

"I can't believe the central government would be foolish enough to take such a claim at face value—and to threaten to destroy us over it! Who even sent them such bogus claims?"

"I heard..." the red-haired woman started, and then she paused. "My family's... Master Gyokuen's seal was used in the letter."

"What?" The aunt's eyes went wide. Rikuson's little cousins, distressed by their mother's outburst, began to cry. He could do nothing except try to comfort them.

"Are you okay?" asked a little girl, coming over to them. She had red hair and green eyes herself. She began to comfort the young cousins.

"You, dear, would you take the children inside and entertain them?"

"Yes, Mother," the red-haired girl said, taking the cousins by the hands. She tugged on Rikuson's hand too, but he shook his head, refusing.

"Then you're saying Master Gyokuen did this?!" Rikuson's aunt demanded.

"No. My honored husband is on a trip to distant Shaoh. I'm sorry. I really don't know anything else about it," the red-haired woman said.

"Then... Then..."

"Come, you must change. I have a nursemaid's outfit; you can use that. The way you're dressed now, everyone will know you're from the Yi

clan.”

Rikuson’s aunt crumpled. The cousins were led away to a children’s room.

Rikuson wondered if it was safe to trust this red-haired woman.

And then he understood which one of them should absolutely not be there.

“N-No, stop!” the red-haired woman said, trying to hold him back, but he brushed her hand away and returned to the mansion. To talk of the mines was to talk of the black stone. Everything his mother and the others were doing, they were doing for I-sei Province. But the royal capital, which judged everything purely on the basis of superficial numbers, didn’t understand that.

The second problem, the false charges—Rikuson was key to it.

If I... If I’m there...

Even if he went to them, there was nothing he could do. And yet he had to go. An inexplicable sense of duty compelled him.

The mob was pressing in around the mansion. The people had knocked down and jumped on top of the guards, beating them with all their pent-up fury. Some onlookers hooted and shouted. Others looked pained by what was happening—but no one moved to help.

You never know what people will do in extreme circumstances.

That was something his mother had told him.

The atmosphere was almost festive. At times, people found violence pleasurable, and there were those who found the Yi clan repugnant, disgusted by the women who dared to rule the western capital.

Rikuson heard a shout like rending silk.

Was that—? No. No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t his older sister. Nor his mother.

He recognized some of the voices, but as terrible as it seemed, Rikuson had his priorities.

Pushing past men fixated only on violence and looting, he headed for the room where his sister and mother always were. Female clan members reached out, but he went by, silently repeating, *I’m sorry, I’m sorry*.

Now that these men had an excuse, they had turned into devils given over to their hunger.

Rikuson was bathed in sweat. His clenched fists were soaked; he panted and his tongue hung out of his mouth like an actual dog. The more water his body excreted, the more parched his throat became.

Each time he seemed about to cross paths with someone, he quickly hid. Despite his efforts, though, he was pinioned just outside his mother's room. Rikuson kicked his feet, struggling.

"What are you doing here?!" someone whispered. It was his sister. Her face white, she clapped a hand over Rikuson's mouth before he could shout. She looked different, somehow, from usual. She'd bundled up her hair and tied it with a scarf and was wearing men's clothing.

"Older Sister. Where's our mother? Why are you dressed like that?"

"Mother's inside. And I'm just borrowing your coming-of-age ceremony clothes."

"What?"

It was the outfit they had made for Rikuson's coming-of-age two years hence. Assuming he would grow, they'd made it a little large; his mother had been planning to spend a long time embroidering it.

Hardly knowing what was going on, Rikuson found himself dragged into another room. His mother had a sword in her hand, the tip soaked in blood. Men lay dead all around her.

"Mother!" Rikuson said, but before he could speak further something was shoved into his mouth. His sister had torn up some cloth and rolled it up as a gag. Rikuson almost choked.

"Shut up, be quiet," his sister commanded. "You talk too loud."

"You mustn't be noticed. You absolutely must not," added his mother.

She and his sister bound Rikuson's hands and feet and stuffed him into a large chest. Then they closed the lid and placed a heavy stone weight on top.

"You must protect the western lands. That's what the Yi men do. Employ any means, use any people you must." His sister smiled. He could see her teeth.

"Are we safe from fire here?"

"Yes, I should think so. There's not much that will burn—and I'm sure they want to use the building again, anyway."

Rikuson didn't know what they were talking about. He could only stare out through the woven mesh of the chest.

"This doesn't look half bad on me, does it, Mother?"

"No, not at all. I think that's exactly what he'd look like in a few years. Now, don't speak."

"I know."

Rikuson understood then what they were going to do. At that moment,

he was the only male child in the Yi clan. If it was true that the mob believed the clan were Imperial pretenders, they would come after Rikuson.

His sister meant to serve as his body double.

Rikuson made another choked noise, but the gag kept him from crying out. His hands and feet were bound and he couldn't move. But he could hear the mob drawing in, the bestial yells and the smell of oil and blood.

His mother brandished the sword.

Her swordsmanship was like a dance, the tip of the blade tracing perfect arcs through the air—but the strokes were light, ephemeral. They only nicked her opponents.

Stop! You have to stop this!

Rikuson bit down on the gag. Spit spilled around the edges, the bottom of the chest growing slick with saliva and tears.

He couldn't do anything, and it agonized him.

He didn't want to remember what was about to happen to his sister, to his mother. But the face of the man who would perpetrate that outrage—his face, alone, Rikuson had to commit to memory.

He couldn't blink.

He knew that face. A member of the "new You" family he'd seen just once, on a visit to their household.

Gyokuen's eldest son.

The front teeth glistening with saliva. The tanned skin. The bony hands. The shape of his ears and the quality of his hair. His voice, which carried like an actor's. Rikuson didn't just remember his face. He used all five senses to drink in as much information as he could, packing it into his brain. So that he would never forget...

As this man did his violence, there was righteousness in his eyes. An egoistic, worthless justice prepared to do anything, even evil, if it was necessary.

But also, a justice that would do anything to protect what mattered to him.

The Yi clan was about to be destroyed on a twisted pretext.

Rikuson's emotions boiled within him; he felt as if a hot stone were being pressed against him. All the water seemed to be evaporating from his body, and yet he was still so hot that he felt he might begin to steam.

Him. He *did this!*

The man grabbed Rikuson's sister by the head, dragging her along by

her hair.

Rikuson wanted to beat the man. He wanted to kill him. But he couldn't. Even if he could get out of this chest, the man would slaughter Rikuson before he could land a blow.

His sister and mother had known. That was why they had shut Rikuson in here. Why they had tied him up so he couldn't do anything.

No more tears came to Rikuson's eyes. He only cursed himself for his weakness, for being small and stupid and unable to do anything.

The rage and the curses were too much for Rikuson's mind, and at some point he lost consciousness. He was brought around by a sound.

Were the men, the mob, still there? He couldn't bear it any longer. Whatever it took, he would kill them.

Rikuson began to flail in the chest like a potato bug. Eventually, he succeeded in causing the stone weight to fall off the lid. He crawled and shuffled and pressed his face into the ground until he managed to get the gag out of his mouth; then he shouted in a hoarse voice, "I'll gill you!"

Rikuson glowered as hard as he could at a man in front of him who was kneeling before the battered corpse of Rikuson's mother and weeping.

"How could it turn out like this?" the man asked. He was plump; Rikuson remembered seeing a soft smile on his face.

It was Gyokuen.

Rikuson pitched forward, crawling toward Gyokuen and grabbing onto his feet. Normally, he might have been able to deal with things more rationally. The tears in Gyokuen's eyes were of pity and regret; this was not a man on whom Rikuson needed to take revenge.

Yet at the same time, he was the father of the man Rikuson hated more than any other.

Gyokuen said nothing, only comforted Rikuson as the boy bit at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's my fault. It's all my fault."

He didn't care that Rikuson's teeth sank into his leg; he didn't care that the blood flowed. Gyokuen only kept trying to offer Rikuson comfort.

Gyokuen took the battered, filthy Rikuson to the home of the woman with red hair.

His aunt and cousins were still there. Unlike his mother and sister, his aunt had never come out front, and no one knew she belonged to the Yi clan. She was dressed as a nursemaid, hidden.

"You're leaving, brother?" asked the oldest of the trio of sisters, Haku-

u, tugging on his sleeve.

"Yes. I'll be going a bit far away."

Rikuson couldn't stay in the western capital anymore. If he did, he was sure he would forget his mother's and sister's words. He could never forgive Gyokuen's eldest son, Gyoku-ou, or those who had joined him in attacking the Yi. He could only harm the people who lived in this city. Though it took every ounce of his strength, he turned his back on his cousins.

"Hey..." A red-haired child called out to him. She was the one they called You, he thought.

"Yes, what?" Rikuson didn't have time to be sweet and gentle just because she was so young.

"Do you hate Brother Gyoku-ou?"

"I don't even want to hear his name."

"Really? He hates me too. I wonder, will he come after me someday?"

Rikuson paused. "If he does, maybe I'll help you. If I feel like it."

With that, Rikuson boarded his carriage.

The carriage clattered along, carrying Rikuson to the port.

Much as it angered him, he had no choice but to turn to Gyokuen for help. A child of thirteen had no way to support himself on his own. There was someone in the capital, he was told, who'd once belonged to the Yi clan. This person had just lost a son Rikuson's age, a boy who looked much like him, and this person was willing to take Rikuson in.

"Don't worry about the family register. You can simply take over his name," Gyokuen said. He didn't intend to make the same mistake twice.

Rikuson still held a grudge against Gyokuen. This man had called himself the source of it all—so Rikuson thought he had a right to know why he and his had been attacked.

"Someone from the You family did it—while you were away! Why?! Was it your oldest son?!" Rikuson demanded.

Gyokuen, distressed, whispered, "Yes. Ou, it was Ou. My other sons had no hand in this."

"Why! Why?! Why would he do something so awful?!"

"The register. I think he wanted to bury the truth. The uprising was a perfect cover. That boy, he's not mine by blood, you see. His mother was a former slave, and his father is a foreigner. As a survivor of a former Windreader tribe, maybe he hated the Yi clan."

“I know what you mean...” Rikuson remembered the talk about lending the family register to Gyokuen, about changing it, and he tried his best to put it all together in his head. “You think you can escape the blame, just because he’s not your child?”

Gyokuen shook his head. “All the blame lies with me. I should have acknowledged Ou as my son from the start. I should have made sure everything was in order so that nothing would trouble him.”

“Then you shouldn’t have kept collecting concubines! No wonder they call you Womanizing You!” Rikuson spat. Gyokuen shrank into himself. “Gyoku-ou wasn’t your real son, but you kept giving him little brothers and sisters! Isn’t that why he thought it was worth instigating a rebellion over a stupid family register?!”

“You’re right. Yes, you’re right. But it’s not just Ou. None of my other children are mine by blood.”

“*What*?” Rikuson was set back on his heels. When the man had so many wives and offspring...how?

“I think it may just be that I’m not physically able to produce children. My first wife gave birth to Ou, yes, but she and I were never able to conceive a child together. I feel terrible, but though I tried with others, it was never any use.”

Rikuson worked his mouth open and shut. “So... So all of the others are...? What about that girl, the one they call You?”

“A merchant with no offspring could never hold his head up. I sought out widows who were already pregnant—the most intelligent women I could find.” Gyokuen looked out the carriage window. “Life in the western capital is hard for a mother and child with no husband or father to care for them. But that vulnerability was also an opportunity. As a merchant, I offered an absolute contract. I guaranteed to provide for them and their children, and in exchange the mothers would furnish me with their skills in a particular field. Moreover, Ou alone was to be my true son, so that no one would get any ideas of taking over the family from him. That part was a secret from my children.”

“So you...”

“They all believe I’m their real father. Or at least they did. But Ou found out. He discovered he wasn’t my son by birth. And there were many who threatened to use the truth of his circumstances against him.”

Rikuson looked, and saw only a plump man holding his head in his hands.

“Money shut most of them up, but some wanted more. It was my intention to simply always treat Gyoku-ou as my true son.”

But all Gyokuen’s work had been in vain.

“Even once he knew I wasn’t his father, Ou continued to act as if I were. So I taught him things. Told him things that would help him.”

“Huh.” Rikuson could not have cared less. If he found room to sympathize, then he would have to forgive—and if that happened, then he would prefer never to have heard any of this.

“In the course of conducting business alongside me, Ou began to fixate on the black stone. Many of his supporters in this rebellion were people who bore a grudge against the Yi clan—including many former Windreaders. Many of them had been working in the mines, you understand.”

That must have been where Gyoku-ou had learned of the deception around the quantity of black stone being extracted.

“So the whole reason he brought down the Yi clan was because of the Windreaders’ misplaced resentment? Aren’t you going to punish your ‘son’? If you’re an Yi man, if you’re a protector of western capital, then you can at least do that much!”

“Yes, a desire for revenge as a member of the Windreaders was one of his reasons. Destroying the family register was another. But there was a third.”

“How many reasons did he need?”

Gyokuen looked at Rikuson. “Ou was under the misimpression that a child of the Yi clan was my true son.”

At that, Rikuson bit his lip.

“He looks like a very intelligent boy. Might I take him as my son?”

Gyokuen had wanted to take in an Yi child. Rikuson had heard him negotiating with his mother himself. Had that offhanded joke motivated the destruction of his entire clan?

That was why Gyoku-ou had invented the talk about the Imperial bloodline: to wipe out Rikuson.

His sister had been a fool. It was she who should have survived, not him. She was so much more important.

Why had she let Rikuson live?

And why should he speak to Gyokuen now?

Rikuson was seized by the desire to throw himself at Gyokuen and beat him to a pulp. They were in a carriage; maybe Rikuson could fling him out

of it. Gyokuen still had the wound on his leg from where he had bitten him; even a child like Rikuson could kill one portly man like Gyokuen, if he was willing to go down with him.

He remembered what his sister had said.

"You must protect the western lands. That's what the Yi men do. Employ any means, use any people you must."

Rikuson couldn't let himself die here. In order not to harm the western lands, he would go to the central region, to a place where no one knew who Rikuson was.

He bit his lip and let his nails dig into his knees. Somehow he managed to swallow the killing urge with the saliva in his mouth.

"Was the last reason the central authority? That *stupid* Imperial edict?"

He remembered the red-haired woman talking about it. The Emperor must be incompetent. He thought he remembered hearing that the Empress Dowager was in such thorough control of politics that people called her the Empress Regnant. Without the fig leaf of that edict, Gyoku-ou, even Gyoku-ou, wouldn't have been able to destroy the Yi clan.

"I'm given to understand that that edict wasn't what the government really wanted."

"Excuse me?" Rikuson said, aghast. What, had they somehow *accidentally* issued the wrong edict?

"It bore the Emperor's seal, but not that of the Empress Regnant—ahem, I mean, the Empress Dowager."

So it had been issued by the puppet, not the puppeteer? Was that the problem?

"His Majesty's health has been poor for some years now, and his mother, the Empress Dowager, is no longer a young woman herself."

"And with one poorly conceived edict, they..."

"Yes. They knew the accusations of imperial bastardy were unfounded, but the deception about the quantities of black stone that had been mined, that couldn't be hidden forever."

"Y-Yes, but..."

So the Yi clan bore fault as well. The way they had shored up poor harvests and bad circumstances with the black stone had worked until now, but it was bound to fall apart eventually.

"That's why I am going to take this opportunity to seize mining rights from the central government," Gyokuen said.

"What?"

The pudgy, frail man had fire in his eyes. “The government doesn’t understand coal’s true value. In the royal capital, it fetches a mere fraction of what it’s worth here. And therein lies an opportunity.”

“You mean...”

“I will use that poorly conceived edict as my bargaining chip. It left a power vacuum in the west—and that is a grave problem.” Now Rikuson saw in Gyokuen’s eyes the assurance of a merchant in his element. “When I bring you to the central region, I will also appear at court as a member of the former Yi clan, to formally protest. This was done under my seal, so I bear responsibility.”

“But that would mean defying the government. What... What would happen to you? To your family?” Rikuson didn’t care in the least what happened to Gyokuen’s idiot son Ou, but then there was his wife, the woman who had harbored his cousins. She might not be related by blood, but he didn’t want to see her dragged into this.

“Here, look at this.” Gyokuen produced a basket from the floor by his feet. Inside were several pigeons. “This is why I sought to expand my business. He who controls the information controls the markets. They can hang me for my remonstrance; it won’t matter. The birds will let my family know before anything can happen to them, and not one of my wives is a weak woman, to be easily undone. We will not be snuffed out.” He pounded his belly as if it were a great drum. “Still not convinced?”

“No... Not yet.” Rikuson’s mind and emotions couldn’t keep up. He was still a child. He couldn’t tell whether an adult was lying.

“In that case, allow me to suggest some paperwork.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a businessman. And I favor those who will help to make the western capital great.”

A results-oriented mindset—he was a businessman indeed.

“At the same time, I flirt with danger. Almost by definition, my life will be shorter than my children’s. I fear that, when I am gone, one of them may grow greedy and try something.”

That seemed like something the man Ou would do, Rikuson thought. In fact, he already had.

“Should that happen, I want you to eliminate that child. And then *you* must protect the western capital.”

“What the hell...?”

Didn’t that still work out to him becoming Gyokuen’s successor after

all? He would sooner die.

"After all this, *now* you're going to ask me to wipe your ass?" Rikuson demanded.

"That's not what I'm doing. This is the fate of men who become the wind."

"Men who become the wind..."

Gyokuen, Rikuson realized, was just the kind of man his mother and sister had said he was.

It was a low-down, dirty way to get him. When he put it like that, Rikuson had no choice but to accept. No choice but to learn the same stubbornness under a gentle smile.

Rikuson would take his craggy heart and hone it with a polishing stone, working and working until it was smooth and beautiful. And then he would make himself sharp as a sword, prepared to strike down anyone, anyone at all, when the need arose.

"I believe we've arrived."

Rikuson climbed out of the carriage to find himself at the port. There he saw a man behaving very strangely.

"No ships! No! You can't make me get on one!" There he was, a full-grown man, clinging to a post and throwing a tantrum like a child.

"You *have* to get on the ship or you can't get home. Come on, we finally found one to take you..."

"But—ships! I can't! No ships!"

Rikuson recognized the man—it was Lakan. "Mister? What are you doing?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"Hrm? Who're you? A shrimpy Pawn..."

Lakan had completely forgotten about Rikuson. He was used to that by now, but it was still annoying.

"You're going back to the capital, aren't you? Well, I think you'd have a better time on a boat than going overland." Lurching around in a carriage and lurching around on a ship weren't that different, so better to go with the quicker trip, Rikuson thought.

"Gnrr," Lakan grumbled, but he shuffled onto the boat.

"You really can't remember people's faces, can you, Mister? Are you going to be all right?"

"Hrm... I *guess* it might be a problem when I make it in the world."

"Then when you make your fortune, hire me! I'll remember everyone's faces for you and never forget. It'll be good for you."

“Hm, yeah, all right.”

It was the simplest of conversations—he never imagined that a decade later, it would actually come true. By then, the man who had come to be known as the freak strategist had completely forgotten about Rikuson.

In the end, the Yi clan was destroyed. Even in the face of a formal protest, the central government didn’t acknowledge that the Imperial edict had been mistaken, but they seemed to have reached a compromise.

Witness:

Item. Survivors of the Yi clan would not be hunted down.

Item. The name I-sei, the Western Yi, Province would be retained.

Item. Gyokuen, not “of the Yi clan” but “*formerly* of the Yi clan,” would rule the western capital.

Item. I-sei Province would not pay taxes on the coal it mined—as a form of hush money. Unofficially, of course.

The Yi clan remained disgraced, but Gyokuen had chosen the flourishing of I-sei Province over honor. As much as it pained Rikuson to admit it, Gyokuen was his foremost model of a man who sought the good of the western capital before all else.

Chapter 21: The Strategist Takes Command

Amid the blood, Rikuson stood ruminating on the past.

The current administrative building was within the Yi clan mansion; in fact, for his office, Gyoku-ou had chosen the very room that Rikuson's mother had once used.

He lay stabbed to death in the place where he had committed that outrage seventeen years ago. It was almost too perfect.

Rikuson had returned to the western capital on Gyokuen's orders, but when he had discovered that his immediate superior would be the one man he remembered more clearly than any other, he thought he might go mad. He had endured, however, so that he might honor his sister's last words. When Gyoku-ou had asked him if he was part of the La clan, Rikuson had gone beyond anger; he found all he could do was laugh. The man he could never forget, it turned out, didn't remember him at all.

This was the man that Gyokuen had raised as his son, for all his flaws. He might not have a blood connection to his father, but he had the talent to help the western lands grow and be great. Perhaps the only thing to truly regret about him was his sense of inferiority. The realization that he was not Gyokuen's true child had twisted him.

He had sought, not to make the western lands great, nor to protect them, but to use them as a means of attacking Shaoh. Perhaps he wanted to eradicate the source of his own blood.

That, Rikuson could not overlook.

The stage was too perfect, like it had been set for him.

Rikuson drew out the knife and knelt next to the man Gyoku-ou had killed.

People came rushing in. "What's going on in here?" one said. Then they saw the bloodstained floor and Rikuson with the two bodies.

"Wh-What in the world is this, Master Rikuson?!" Gyoku-ou's aide asked. The others with him started chattering noisily. One lady-in-waiting gave a shriek.

"It is as you see," Rikuson said. "When I entered, he was already dead.

I simply found an opportunity to take the knife and killed the traitor in return. It was all I could do."

"Is this true?" the aide said, eyeing him. Indeed, everyone looked at Rikuson suspiciously.

Of course. It was only natural for them to suspect him. Everyone there knew that Rikuson had been received with little hospitality, and they knew it was possible he was not to be trusted. He would have to play this very, very carefully.

Or, no. Perhaps it would be better to be buried in the same place as his mother and older sister...

The thoughts were hardly through his head when someone said, "He was already murdered when you entered the room. So you killed the rebel —is that not right?"

It was, of all people, Lakan standing there. He looked half asleep and wasn't even wearing his monocle. Weren't they in the middle of a state ceremony? What was he doing here?

"Master Lakan. What happened to the ceremony?"

"I was sleepy, so I ducked out."

Ah, Rikuson thought, it was all over now. There was no hiding anything from Lakan. He had neither good intentions nor bad, but would simply lay out the facts. Rikuson gripped the knife: if he was found out here, it would allow him to die in the same place as his mother and sister.

"You heard the man," Lakan said to those around them.

"Wh-What do you mean, Grand Commandant Kan?"

"Hrm? He's telling the truth. He killed the rebel who killed the man. Where's the crime in that? If anything, this is all *your* fault for leaving such scant security."

"Wha?" said the aide, thrown for a loop by this accusation.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

There was much murmuring, but the general consensus was that if Grand Commandant Kan said it, then that was that, and everyone began to withdraw. Their suspicion of Rikuson had been dispelled in an instant.

Rikuson wondered, briefly, if he could live with this. Yet at the same time, he was relieved to have kept his promise to his sister.

"We can talk about this later. For now, you had better change," the aide said to him. The lady-in-waiting who had screamed earlier tremblingly held out a handkerchief to Rikuson. She was slim; Rikuson had seen her several times before.

“Are you here for work, Miss Chue?” he whispered in her ear.

“Aww, how’d you know it was me?” Her face looked completely different, but the voice was that of the cheerful lady-in-waiting.

“He was served up to me on a silver platter. I thought there must have been someone behind it.”

The way nobody came to the office, even though circumstances were suspicious. Yes, Gyoku-ou had told them all to clear out, but it was a bit *too* convenient.

Rikuson understood: it had been Gyoku-ou’s destiny to die, even if it hadn’t been Rikuson who did it.

“Ohh. Was it too obvious?” Chue asked, but she didn’t deny it. “How’d you know it was me? I changed my hair color and the size of my eyes!”

“It was the shape of your ears. You have the loveliest ears, Miss Chue.”

“Eep! Are you really studying the ears of a married woman that closely?” The voice was Chue’s, but the nervous body language looked like a completely different person. She’d brought Rikuson a change of clothes, while managing to appear thoroughly horrified by the blood all over him.

“Do you think I’m going to meet my end when the physician begins his investigation?” Rikuson asked offhandedly.

“Dr. You is the physician in charge here. He’s a very dedicated worker, but a flexible thinker—and more than anything, he wants the western capital to be peaceful. Miss Maomao, now, she might start digging out of sheer curiosity. And the other two doctors, they’ve got their personal quirks.”

“I see what you mean. I’ll make it my business not to see Maomao again after this.” The thought saddened Rikuson, but there was no avoiding it. He could not take back what he had done.

“Good plan. Oh, and if you would be quiet about me too?” Chue said, not neglecting to hush him up.

“I certainly will. Might I make one request in exchange?”

“What would that be?” Rikuson could hear the distinctive voice clearly in his ear, yet to any onlookers, Chue might not even seem to be moving her lips. Her disguise was nearly perfect; even Rikuson might not have recognized her if they hadn’t spent so many days together in the farming village.

“You collected a little something from the room earlier, didn’t you, Miss Chue?”

She'd been so subtle about it that anyone else might not have noticed. But Rikuson saw that the position of Chue's hand was a little different after she had entered the room than before.

"Aww, why do you have to be so sharp?" she said. Then she added, "Small Lin is the real victim here, isn't he?" She was surprisingly frank about it.

"In that case, he must have come here to make some demand on the basis of that stolen thing. Specifically, a family register, yes?"

"Please, don't say any more. Miss Chue's head might not stay attached to her shoulders!" Chue said, although she didn't sound very worried. She was, however, taking care that there was no one else around.

"Might I ask that you dispose of this object you obtained as quickly as possible?" Rikuson did not and would not forgive Gyoku-ou, but neither did he intend to besmirch his memory.

"I'll have to ask my superiors."

"It would benefit everyone, getting rid of that thing. What if it became public knowledge that the Empress's real father was some nobody from nowhere?" Rikuson sensed that Chue already knew the truth.

"I know, I know, it wouldn't be any fun at all." She still sounded unruffled, but her face was slightly more tense than before. She must be a very capable spy. Rikuson wondered if she might simply snuff him out, but he liked to think she wouldn't.

If someone investigated the family register, it was possible that they might uncover Empress Gyokuyou's true father. One could see who her mother's previous husband had been, and even if he were dead, his family could be investigated. That would be no good at all.

"Miss Chue knows why this family register is bad news for her, but what makes *you* want to get rid of it, Mister Rikuson?"

"It's nothing special. It's simply, if you make a deal with someone and then their secret is exposed, the deal becomes worthless, doesn't it?"

He wasn't doing this for Gyoku-ou—the man who would have foolishly exposed the entire western region to danger. That great mass of inferiority toward Gyokuen.

There was one reason, and one reason only, that Rikuson wanted to destroy the family register—and that was because he felt a duty to Gyokuen.

"Understood! I'll talk to my superiors about it." Chue handed Rikuson the change of clothes, and then she went off somewhere, disguise and all.

“It doesn’t seem like she directly serves the Moon Prince,” Rikuson mused, but he wouldn’t pry any deeper. For one thing, he now had a guilty conscience.

Rikuson went back to his room, where he closed the door and knelt down. He desperately wanted to change his bloodied clothes, but his body wouldn’t move.

“I don’t understand. It’s supposed to be over.” Tears began falling from his eyes. *Ploop-ploop-ploop.* “Am I wrong? Is it only just beginning?”

He sniffled like a crying child. As a grown adult, it was embarrassing—but at that moment he felt his mother and sister watching over him.

What’s more, for some reason, Lakan had covered for him.

“I didn’t lie...but he should have known it wasn’t the truth.”

What an uncharacteristic thing his former boss had done, he thought.

His next thought was that he would go on. In order to protect the western lands, he would live, he would continue to be the wind.

Chapter 22: The Imperial Younger Brother's Complaint

Even in a completely different part of the estate, Maomao could hear the women sobbing. From the second floor of the annex, she could see the line out front.

"My, my, how awful," Chue said, as if it had nothing to do with her. "They say funerals are supposed to be solemn, but they certainly make a spectacle of it here in the west."

"I think this *is* pretty solemn by their standards." Maomao stepped away from the window and looked at the grasses on the table, a selection of herbs she'd found that grew on the plains. Chue had picked them for her. She'd just been trying to organize and use everything when she'd received some disturbing news. Gyoku-ou, it seemed, had been killed.

She'd wondered what was up yesterday, when only Gyoku-ou's brothers and sisters had been at the ceremony, and he hadn't appeared at all.

They said he'd been murdered by a farmer who had repeatedly approached him for money. Maomao was half surprised to hear it—but the other half of her feelings included understanding, a strange relief, and a certain amount of anxiety.

"A farmer? Really?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. I think you already know, Miss Maomao. About how Master Gyoku-ou could be a bit *too* charitable."

That was a nice way of putting it, but what Chue meant was the way he lent out money.

"Fair point. I think the people on the receiving end should know that the person lending them the money isn't a god. What were the conditions of the loan?" Maomao asked, figuring that if anyone would know, it would be Chue with her ample information.

"You're right; it's exactly like you say. He didn't lend money unconditionally. He basically asked that they give their help when there was an emergency, but I don't think people could really picture an emergency. It might be different in the more westerly villages, but there

are no instances of the barbarian tribes attacking the western capital."

Those problems seemed so far away geographically, and if nothing else, certainly people didn't expect war to break out in their lifetimes. That was what had led to the recent rebellion. Gyoku-ou had appeared to cover for Jinshi while actually stirring up the people to war—but it ended up being what got him killed.

"I guess I can't say I don't sympathize." Maomao understood, at least somewhat, how the farmer who had killed Gyoku-ou must have felt. People always thought things didn't concern them until the sparks drifted down on their own heads. And the poorer one was, the less one could think about anything that wasn't right in front of their nose. But that narrow vision could also blind one with desire. "Can I ask something? What happened with the killer?"

"He was killed right back. But still, the farmer's family was informed before things became public."

Chue helpfully explained what Maomao had actually wanted to know. If someone made an attempt on the life of an Imperial family member, their entire family could be destroyed. And while Gyoku-ou wasn't a member of the Imperial line, he was the older brother of Empress Gyokuyou and son of Gyokuen. Maomao and the others might not have a very favorable impression of him, but he had much support in the western capital. Even if the murderer was already dead himself, the murderer's family could still be in danger.

"Do you think the family was able to get away?"

"Miss Chue wouldn't know. I can tell you that mob justice is against the law in the western capital, but still, if they didn't get out of here, they could be in some trouble."

Illegal the act might be, but it was impossible to know how effective the law would actually be at restraining people. The uprising had come knocking at the door of the annex where the Imperial younger brother was staying. The people were clearly not in their right minds.

"Anything else you want to ask, Miss Maomao?" Chue sat in her chair with an indolent smile on her face. Maomao sat too, with a half-withered medicinal herb in her hands. She planned to pick the leaves off the branches and dry them.

Was it really a farmer who killed him? She thought about asking the question outright, then stopped herself. Instead she said, "What's going to happen next? He was the acting regional governor, after all. He was

handling a lot of work."

"Yes, about that..." Chue picked up a branch to help. She could be a bit loosey-goosey, but she was also a capable lady-in-waiting, and now she mimicked what Maomao was doing, dexterously plucking leaves off the branch. "Last year—well, for about a year by now, I guess—Mister Rikuson has been taking care of a lot of the work. It will go with what he was already doing as aide, and with one little exception, there should be no problem at all."

"Why do I have a feeling that little exception is crucial?"

"Because it is. There's no one to serve as the *face* of the operation. Bad news, bad news."

"Ahh..." Maomao understood. But at the same time, she had a question.

"Given the actual work involved, it makes sense for Mister Rikuson to do it, but he does come from the central region," Chue said. His response to the insect swarm had amply demonstrated his ability to lead, but he wasn't powerful enough to be Gyoku-ou's successor.

"Master Gyokuen has lots of kids, right? Master Gyoku-ou's younger brothers and sisters. There was that, um...Dahai, was it? Who runs the port?" Maomao ventured.

"Right. Yes, there's him. Gyoku-ou has six younger brothers alone. Not to mention a son of his own, although his brothers and sisters would probably be first in line."

"Can't one of them do it?"

"Well, the thing is..." Chue sounded like she didn't quite want to say. "They all have specialized jobs, you see."

"Specialized jobs? Like what?"

"Like boats, or pottery. Lots of craftsmen in that family! No matter how competent he is, a farmer like Lahan's Brother would never be able to rule a nation, right?"

Maomao tried to imagine Lahan's Brother doing desk work instead of tossing a hoe over his shoulder. He could probably manage it, she figured—but he would also be ten times more effective out in the fields. Not to mention, those who stood at the very top couldn't be merely ordinary. Even the most exceptional could expect to be replaced if they made a single mistake.

"I'm thinking he could have afforded one more person with good political sense," Maomao said.

"He probably just didn't want anyone to fight with his eldest son. And

if you think about it, it's actually Empress Gyokuyou who rose highest in the world, politically speaking. It sounds like Master Gyoku-ou's son hasn't had much training yet—they figured, why rush while his father was alive?"

"I guess that makes a certain kind of sense."

You couldn't go much higher in the world than forging a marriage connection with the Emperor. Gyokuen, a merchant, had succeeded in becoming His Majesty's father-in-law.

But that left them back at square one: Who was going to lead the western capital?

"I guess we can't expect Master Gyokuen to come back to the western capital at this point," Maomao said.

"In his position, it would be tricky. Even if it is his true son who died, I don't think it would bring him back to the western capital now. I think there's going to be some pretty uncomfortable conversations for the Moon Prince after the funeral. You can't avoid the question of whether it was really a farmer from the western capital who did it."

How kind of her: this was precisely the subject in which Maomao was keenly interested.

Gyoku-ou had been a thorn in Jinshi's side with all his talk of war, true enough—but he was an even bigger thorn now that he had gone and died.

"There's a few other bigwig types around, right? Can't they do something about this?"

"Oh, Miss Chue couldn't possibly tell you. But there is one thing I know for certain." She leaned in very close to Maomao.

"Y-Yes? What?" Maomao asked, somewhat cowed.

"No matter what the outcome, the Moon Prince will come home *very* tired. This calls for a medicinal brew that will whisk away the fatigue—ideally something not too bitter."

"I'll see what I can do," Maomao mumbled. She plucked some more leaves and wondered whether the quack had eaten through all of the honey they'd brought.

True to Chue's prediction, Jinshi was profoundly tired the next day. It was so bad that even the quack, who could usually be readily tricked into concluding his examination without comment, began to worry that the Moon Prince might be ill.

"I'm just tired. That's all. You can go," Jinshi snapped, and the quack

shuffled out dejectedly. Maomao, however, remained.

Well, this is awkward.

It was the first time they'd really seen each other since his little "charging" episode. Still, Jinshi obviously wasn't faking his exhaustion, and Maomao was overcome with wondering what could have happened.

His usual entourage must have already known, because they looked like they were under a collective cloud. What tiring tale had he told them?

"You can go ahead and sit down," Jinshi said, so Maomao sat. She'd already given the draught she'd created to Suiren. "Ask me what happened."

"What happened, sir?" Maomao asked obediently.

"You'll never believe it!"

It had been quite a while, Maomao reflected, since Jinshi had looked quite so spent in front of his retainers. Sometimes he got like this when only Gaoshun was around, but...

With Suiren, Taomei, Chue, and Basen?

Not to mention, Baryou was probably out of sight somewhere nearby.

Jinshi flaunted his listlessness in front of all of them. Maomao might have expected Suiren or Taomei to scold him, but no reprimands were forthcoming. It showed just how justifiable his listlessness was.

Suiren set the medicine gently in front of Jinshi. In fact, it was closer to a broth; Maomao had settled on a sort of soup because trying too hard to mask bitterness with sweetness could result in a just plain weird flavor. She'd put in vegetables along with medicinal herbs that helped with fatigue, and stewed it with plenty of milk and butter until the sinewy meat was soft enough that it would be easy to chew.

To be perfectly honest, many of the ingredients were rather crude for an imperial palate, but Maomao had at least tried to pick ingredients that she thought would be most effective. The broth was green—it was still medicine, in the end—but it should taste all right. The quack, Chue, and Lihaku had all given it their stamp of approval.

"Mmmhh." Jinshi took a mouthful of soup and then let out a breath. He was sure taking his time, considering he had begged her to listen to him. The important thing was that the soup seemed to agree with him, because he went back for another spoonful, and then another, trying all the different ingredients.

I guess he's just that hungry, Maomao thought. Once he'd had a mouthful, it seemed like he couldn't stop, and he ate everything. He wiped

his glistening lips with the back of his hand—not very princely behavior, but appropriate to a young man his age.

The next moment, though, he suddenly looked ready. He straightened up, and he didn't seem so tired anymore—talk about your quick changes.

"We discussed who would be the leader of the western region going forward, but it was all a lot of going in circles, as we expected," he said.

"I should imagine, sir," Maomao replied with a quick glance at Taomei. If it had been just Suiren or Chue there, that would be one thing, but Taomei's eyes scared her. She had to act somewhat formal and distant because she could never be quite sure what aspect of her attitude Taomei might take to be disrespectful.

"Sir Gyokuen's other sons unanimously rejected the idea of stepping forward themselves. They each excel in his own field, but none is suited to politics. That goes for all of them. Meanwhile, Sir Gyoku-ou's child isn't yet studied enough in politics, or so I'm told. He's not powerful enough to suddenly assign him acting governor." Jinshi sounded emphatic. His fists were clenched. "So we considered Sir Gyoku-ou's aides. They're competent enough at their jobs, but none of them had the mettle to stand at the top."

"I suppose they're the kind of people who are more comfortable assisting."

"Right."

Sometimes that's just how people were. Not everyone longed to rise relentlessly in the world. There were those who didn't need a high station, so long as they had enough to eat. It seemed all of Gyoku-ou's aides had possessed this disposition.

Did he go out of his way to surround himself with people like that, or did they just gravitate toward him?

If someone wanted a little bit of prestige but didn't want to have to stand at the very top, they might be happier as an aide. Even if the ones who were too diligent could get too invested in their work and end up with stomach problems.

"We asked around among the most important and influential people in the western capital, but the answer was always no. From a mercantile perspective, it seems the disadvantages outweighed the gains."

"They're very much a merchant people, aren't they, sir?"

"Yes, that's how this town works. It's all well and good if someone has as much power as Sir Gyokuen did, but the other merchants are all about

as powerful as each other."

Maomao didn't know how many influential merchants there were in the western capital, but if one put himself forward too eagerly, he might well be crushed by the others. Besides, everyone had their hands full dealing with the fallout from the swarm, and it was hard to blame them if they didn't want to take on more work.

"I thought there was one person who might fit the bill..." Jinshi said.

"Yes? Who was that?"

"Rikuson."

Yes, Maomao realized, of course Jinshi would think of him. His name had even occurred to her, after all. Above all, Chue would certainly have given a full report.

"You seem oddly...accepting of that idea," Jinshi said, looking mildly annoyed.

Better get out ahead of this before he remembers the whole marriage proposal business and it turns silly.

"Sir, when the swarm came, I saw him stay completely calm and take action. Besides, he has the guts to survive as the freak's right-hand man, doesn't he?"

Objectively speaking, he was highly capable.

"Yes! Miss Chue agrees with this!" Chue said, her hand shooting into the air. A pair of predatory eyes gleamed to one side.

"Yes, well, he excused himself on the grounds that he had been sent here on behalf of the central government."

"Figures."

Given that Rikuson had come from the central region, it would be best if he didn't stick his neck out too far. All just as Chue had said.

If he was from the western capital himself, maybe things would be different...

"Hrm?" Maomao said. Something about her own thought nagged at her, but she assumed it was just her imagination and ignored it.

"In fact, Rikuson said that *I* should lead this place!"

"He what?!" Maomao exclaimed; even she couldn't keep herself from jumping out of her seat and talking at the top of her lungs.

The predatory eyes now lighted on Maomao. She lowered herself back into her chair, feeling a tad queasy. "What do you suppose he was thinking, sir?" she asked with studied politeness.

"Exactly what he said, I suspect. Daily business could continue as

normal, with the aides handling everything. But he thought I should remain as the ‘face.’ Curse! That! Man! Rikuson!”

Yikes.

No wonder he was so tired. He seemed to be emphasizing his main point.

“But if he came here ‘on behalf,’ I’m nothing more than a visitor. Am I wrong?” Jinshi asked, looking to her.

“No, sir.”

“By all rights, I could be back in the capital by now couldn’t I? Why does everyone simply stand around and look at me? Eh?”

“Of course, sir...”

She remembered him saying that this trip would be three months at the shortest. But he never said how long it might be at the longest.

How many months has it been now? Maomao counted on her fingers. More than five months that they had spent in the western capital. Including the boat trip to get here, it had been more than half a year since they’d left the royal capital. Frankly, she wished Gyoku-ou had had the good grace to be more mindful when he got killed. Uh, not that she was glad he was dead, but couldn’t he have waited to kick the bucket until after he had resolved the misunderstandings about Jinshi, about the Imperial younger brother? He’d only fired the people up for war.

How much trouble could one old bastard cause?

Then again, what would have happened if he’d survived?

If a man with so much influence in the region had really pressed for war, even Jinshi, an Imperial family member, could only have resisted him for so long. It might have been possible to at least avoid actual war with Shaoh, but...

“But Master J-Jinshi,” Maomao said, using his name with some hesitation. The predator’s eyes were terrifying. “You intended to remain regardless, right?”

Jinshi didn’t say anything to that—meaning it was true. If he had really found it so unbearable, he could easily have just gone back home the moment the swarm hit. Considering his position, nobody could or would have complained; in fact, he’d no doubt received a letter or two encouraging him to do just that.

But that would have left the people ragged in body and soul from the swarm, with the foreign tribes attacking and no one to lead and guide them. Even in the midst of a deeply unpleasant situation, Jinshi was using

his head.

"We can't just leave the western capital like this, can we?" Maomao asked.

"You're absolutely right." Jinshi heaved a sigh. He was back to looking tired, and he was taking little glances at Maomao.

"What is it, sir?"

"Under the present circumstances, I think that it would be safest to return to the central region."

Safest for *whom* to return, Maomao wondered, but then she realized—he meant her.

"I suppose it would be," she allowed. He might have sent her away for her nominal safety, but she had still ended up swarmed by grasshoppers. Then an insurrection had come right to her doorstep. But this was a mistake, here. "You can't tell me to go home, sir, not now. I guarantee you'd lose your freak strategist too." She drove the point home.

I'd love to go home. God, how I would.

She would carry on. She had to write letters to the madam and Yao and En-en.

"If we ask ourselves, how much of a loss is the freak strategist really to the central authority, I think the honest answer is, not very much. In fact, he's probably more use to them here, don't you think? Even if he can make life a little noisy. And he has a Shogi companion and everything."

"But—"

"If you want to send me off to wherever, well, if I'm just a pawn who makes no difference to the strategic situation, I guess I have no right to object. Am I a pawn to you, Master Jinshi?"

He was silent.

"Is there something you'd like to say to me?"

"Yes. I want to..." He started to answer, but refused to look her in the eye. Finally he said, "I want to have another bowl of that stew."

"Sure," Maomao said after a second. "I'll go get some more."

Apparently, she figured, this was his way of saying that she was useful enough to keep around.

She hoped the quack doctor hadn't eaten the rest of the stew as a midnight snack. She had a naughty little thought that maybe she should have put a sign on it: *For Imperial use only.*

Epilogue

As you will.

That was the entirety of the letter to Rikuson.

He thought of the red-haired girl, You. Gyokuen's youngest child, the daughter of an attractive traveling performer, raised so that she could one day go to the central region. She had harbored the survivors of the Yi clan. He was sure that Haku-u and her sisters, likewise, had been saved by the girl whose smile never faltered.

Just as Gyokuen had predicted, You grew up beautiful, and he had changed her name to Gyokuyou. He sent her to the rear palace, and now she had risen to become Empress.

Gyoku-ou had sought to follow in the footsteps of his father Gyokuen, whatever form that took.

Though she did it in her own way, Gyokuyou was the same.

What Gyokuen valued more than anything was the protection of the western capital. Gyoku-ou had sought to make it flourish, while Gyokuyou had worked to ingratiate herself with the central authority.

The trio whom Rikuson had once treated as little sisters had also grown up beautiful. He only saw them again after Gyokuyou had become Empress. The three of them served among her ladies-in-waiting; they had left the rear palace with her and lived in the Empress's palace.

The younger sisters didn't remember Rikuson, but the eldest, Haku-u, knew him. This even though he had abandoned his past name and was living as someone else. Perhaps it was his fault for scrutinizing the sisters too closely as they went past.

Haku-u got in touch with him—in part because he was a familiar face, but in part to urge him, as a surviving member of the Yi clan, to return to the western capital and become its leader. But that was unthinkable. Rikuson was the son of a rebel; he was not supposed to exist.

He thought that perhaps Haku-u was seeking to return the Yi to their former power—but in the decade and more since they had parted ways, she had grown into a loyal lady-in-waiting of Gyokuen's daughter Gyokuyou.

Why, then, did she seek to have Rikuson rule the western capital?

He was soon presented with the opportunity to find out. On last year's visit to the city, Rikuson had taken part in Lakan's place.

He was haunted by the possibility that someone would recognize him, or figure out who he truly was, and he cringed every moment of the journey. To his amazement, however, he was treated just like all the other guests—and nothing more. No one knew he was a son of the clan that had once held the western capital in the palm of its hand. Most notably, Gyoku-ou appeared to pay Rikuson no particular mind at all.

The western capital was flourishing. Much more, he thought, than it likely ever had under the Yi. Never mind the tragedy of the past; the inhabitants of this city were businesspeople through and through. In light of the wealth the city now enjoyed, what had happened could almost be dismissed as a necessary evil.

Rikuson, though, was alert to the shadows that flourishing cast.

During his brief stay in the western capital, Gyokuen summoned him.

"What do you think of the western capital?" he had asked.

Gyokuen had seen it, the twistedness that afflicted Gyoku-ou. What might begin as a small distortion, if left unaddressed for decades, could ultimately warp beyond repair. Moreover, it was now decided that Gyokuen would go to the central region. No doubt he was contemplating what Gyoku-ou would do without him to act as a check.

Rikuson had known that Gyoku-ou was not worthy of trust.

It was Rikuson whom Gyokuen chose to act as his check in the western capital.

"Why don't you do something about him yourself?!" Rikuson had demanded, adopting a vehement tone that he hadn't used in more than ten years. Even though he had sworn to himself that he wouldn't speak that way again after he became Rikuson.

So it was that he came back to the western capital, Gyokuen having chosen him personally.

He was to be Gyoku-ou's watchman—and, should anything happen, his executioner...

Rikuson suspected Gyokuyou knew about Gyokuen's decision. She sent letters to him via Haku-u. Always using pigeons. How Rikuson had sweated while the Imperial younger brother tried to find out how the bandits were communicating! The pigeons were a special means of communication, not something to be shared with the Imperial family.

As you will.

He couldn’t act in accordance with the content of Empress Gyokuyou’s letter.

He had worried; all this time, he had worried about it.

If only the man Gyoku-ou had acknowledged his own responsibility, sometime, somehow.

“Could I have been more unlucky?”

If he could have been only Gyoku-ou’s watchman.

Why did that bastard have to be *so* warped?

Why had no one tried to repair him?

Why had they made Rikuson do it?

No... That’s not true at all.

Rikuson had wished for this, longed for it.

To take revenge at last for his mother and sister.

And his wish had been granted.

“Now I no longer feel like doing anything at all,” he said at length.

He tried to pass off the responsibility to someone else, tried to nominate someone other than himself to lead the western capital now that Gyoku-ou was gone. In a time of peace, there might have been a few takers, but no one wanted to step into the role of acting governor with the crisis of the insect swarm still fresh.

He even started to hear people say that he himself should take the position, and that was when he finally gave voice to his thoughts: “I think you, Moon Prince, might be appropriate.”

The Imperial younger brother had gone slack-jawed. Rikuson genuinely felt bad. But he did have an insolent little thought, that at least then he would have company in the misery of being overworked.

“What shall I do?”

Rikuson was well and truly burned out. He could summon no desire to do anything, and even tried to push the things he didn’t want to do onto other people. In fact, he was ducking work at that very moment, reclining in the branches of a tree.

The purpose for which he had lived for more than ten years was gone, leaving a yawning emptiness in its place. It would not have been surprising had he simply died.

What Rikuson had done was unforgivable—but at the same time, they had lost their chance to punish him. It was cruel, and mean, and dirty. Rikuson found his own existence repulsive and hideous.

Sunlight peeked among the leaves, and small birds fluttered through the

air.

“Birds...”

When he saw them gliding effortlessly through the sky, it brought back memories of a time when he had believed that he would become the wind. When the day came for his coming-of-age ceremony, he would put on the embroidered outfit. Then he might become a merchant, or a sailor, or journey somewhere far away. Back then, so many and such grand dreams had been there for him to dream.

“Far away...”

That might be good, he thought, as he climbed down from the tree. Go somewhere there was no one else, live a wandering life, and finally fall dead in the fields somewhere.

Suddenly, he thought he heard a voice: *“No, you can’t!”*

Rikuson looked around, but there was no one there. Just the wind blowing and the birds flying.

“Aren’t you going to do something for the western capital?”

He was just hearing things. The wind and the birdsong had somehow sounded to him like a young woman’s voice.

Nonetheless, he said as if in answer, “Must I labor on, Elder Sister?”

The wind gusted, a great cry.

“Ha ha ha! Now you’re just being mean.” Rikuson laughed and lay down on the ground. The sky spread above him, wide and blue, and the breeze felt lovely on his skin.

That journey would have to wait. He could go after the life had returned to the western capital, after people once again greeted each other with a smile as they passed by.

All to give his mother and sister what they had wished for.

For them, he could toil for a little longer.

Translator's Notes – *The Apothecary Diaries* vol. 11

Show Me the Shogi!

Hello, and welcome to the translation team's reflections for volume 11 of *The Apothecary Diaries*! We've spent a lot of time in these essays talking about the common forms that translation challenges take. This time, let's look at a localization issue of a kind that you don't see every day.

In chapter 3, the characters discover records of Shogi games, which are given in standard Shogi notation.

The scraps contained inscriptions like "S59" and "+B83." Even Maomao, who had no interest in Shogi whatsoever, recognized this as notation showing how the pieces in a Shogi match had moved. This notation involved foreign numerals not used in Kaou Province, perhaps for ease of reading.

Does this seriously mean anything? *Maomao held back a groan. Instead she turned to Onsou and asked, "Do you have another Shogi board and some pieces we could borrow?" When you didn't understand something, there was nothing better than to try it out.*

Onsou furnished the materials, and with a click-click-click*, Maomao began to line up the pieces.*

"Let's see... S59 would be..." She tried to put the pieces where the notes indicated, but increasingly she suspected it was a futile endeavor. She was just about to place one of the pawns when she stopped.

"Now, that's funny," Chue interjected, looking at the board. "It says that Pawn should move to row two."

"Huh! Even I know that's an illegal move." Even Lihaku was getting in on the act.

Our challenge this volume came in the form of how records of Shogi matches are formatted in Japanese notation versus Western notation. When approaching this passage, we began from the premise that "like translates

like”—in other words, to give English readers a similar experience to that of Japanese readers, it was fair game to transpose the Japanese Shogi notation into the accepted style in English. Seems simple enough, right?

The problem was, standard Shogi notation differs substantially between Japanese-language and English-language texts, and this created a puzzle for the translation.

At its core, Japanese Shogi notation only requires that two properties are listed for a move: a piece’s destination on the board (written as two characters: the first written in Arabic numerals and representing the column on the board, and a kanji numeral representing the row), and the piece being moved (written as a single kanji character representative of that piece). In the text above, what we’ve transcribed as S59 in English notation is 5九銀 (*go-kyuu-gin*) in Japanese notation—column 5, row 9 (九 being the kanji for 9), and the piece being 銀, what we call a Silver General in our translations.

English notation requires the same aspects as Japanese notation, but with one extra feature: the move that the piece makes. English denotes each piece with a letter (S for Silver General), and the destination is written as two numerals, both Arabic (column 5 row 9 is written as 59). Western notation places a symbol denoting the type of move between the piece and its destination (- meaning a simple move, etc.) P-24 would indicate that a Pawn (P) makes a simple move (-) to column 2, row 4 (24) on the board.

So to sum up, both systems indicate the piece making the move, but Western notation places it at the start of the sequence while Japanese places it at the end; Western notation includes the type of movement (simple move, move with capture, etc.), which is not obligatory in Japanese; and both systems include the destination, but again, this comes at the beginning in Japanese and later in Western notation.

That might seem straightforward as far as it goes, although there are some other quirks that might make the notation look even more exotic in the translation than it does in the original. For example, one of the other moves mentioned is 8三馬 (Arabic 8, kanji 3, “horse”). *Uma*, “horse,” is the Japanese shorthand for “*ryuma*,” “dragon horse,” which is the promoted form of the Bishop (*kakugyou*). While Japanese has separate kanji to indicate each of the promoted pieces, as here, Western notation uses the code for the original piece preceded by a plus sign. So the promoted Bishop is notated as “+B,” and the full notation for this move is

“+B83.” (Incidentally, the line about the notation using “foreign numerals not used in Kaou Province” is a direct translation of what’s in the Japanese text. Since Maomao and her companions evidently write using what we would call Chinese characters, we figured that it was fair to describe the Arabic numerals as “foreign” whether there was one of them or two. Just another of the many small considerations that go into seemingly incidental lines.)

The main localization issue appears with Chue’s line, which we rendered as “It says that Pawn should move to row two.” In Japanese, the line is quite brief: “*Nifu desu yo!*” The word “*nifu*” is the Shogi notation 二歩, or a kanji 2 followed by the character for “pawn” (literally, “foot soldier”). In other words, the initial Arabic numeral (the column on the board) is not given—not, most likely, because it isn’t there in the records they’re studying, but because it’s not what Chue is interested in. We know by now that the kanji number indicates the row where the piece ends up. A pawn on row 2 is striking to her because—as apparently even Lihaku knows—pawns start on the *third* row and can’t move backward.

That’s all well and good, but because Western notation goes piece, destination file, destination row, we can’t indicate only the piece and row without leaving a gap. It would have to be written as something like “P...2,” which looks funny and might not even make sense—not to mention the question of how it would be pronounced aloud, since Chue is speaking the line. Hence, we needed a way to get only the relevant information into the line—and casting it as an explanatory statement seemed like the smoothest way to do that.

It’s a relatively minor point in the grand scheme of things—all these considerations are for the benefit of pretty much just this one line, and it’s not a subject that comes up again elsewhere in the book. In translation, even the smallest things can have surprisingly big stories behind them.

Until next time, have fun, read widely, and we’ll see you for volume 12!

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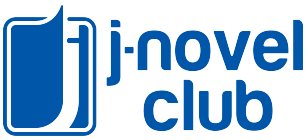

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